**University of Alberta**

# *CHALLENGE OF THE FACE*

by

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# INTRODUCTION

In our world human reality is not defined only by reason and power, but also by a real and unexpected challenge: the meeting with the Other. As Lévinas writes, to meet the Other means to encounter an enigma. The face of the Other is the embodiment of this enigma in and of human existence. The Other is present to me through his face. In one sense this is normal, nothing special or strange. Every human being has a face; we see the faces of Others throughout our lives. But, the face of the Other, is it only an empirical phenomenon like all other empirical phenomena? Is it not more than a physical appearance?

The overall aim of my thesis is to show that the face is more than an empirical appearance, that it has as well a metaphysical significance, one that gives deep ethical and religious meaning to the meeting with the Other, to the experience of alterity. In order to show and to underline the metaphysical significance of the face as an ethical and religious challenge, I will analyze and discuss Lévinas' philosophy of face. I have chosen Lévinas for in my view his work represents one of the twentieth century's most thought-provoking philosophies of alterity.

The specific purpose of this thesis then is to consider Lévinas' philosophy of face and to show the inner relationship between the concept of 'face' on the one hand and ethics and religion on the other. The main argument to be developed is that according to Lévinas' account the face is a permanent ethical/religious challenge addressed to my existence. In a fundamental sense, the face refers to the initial shock of the discovery of alterity through which I also discover myself truly. It is this discovery that mediates between the real presence of the Other and its transcendence. In this way, my experience of the face of the Other challenges my own self-centered reality, putting in question my own being and existence, forcing me to give up my ‘indifference’ to the Other, or my *selfish* preoccupations. I cannot honestly ignore the Other, its calling me to ethical conduct towards it. To signal these ideas, throughout my thesis I will write the “o” in “Other” in upper case in order to distinguish this term from the word “other” as designating common things and objects external to me. '*Autrui*' refers only to persons, to my 'neighbour', and not to common objects and things. In French, Lévinas prefers to use the word '*autrui*' when he talks about our neighbour, or of persons. For designating common things and objects, he uses the word '*autre*'. Since in English there is no corresponding term for the French '*autrui*' I will spell the word 'Other' with an initial capital letter when I refer to persons. This choice underlines the exceptional event that the Other presents for me as an awakening and opening towards what exceeds my own subjectivity.

The main argument of my thesis is that the face constitutes the meeting point of the axes of the ethical and the religious, the empirical and the metaphysical. In order to argue this I will start from the physical appearance of the face and I will show, by appealing to an argument from etymology, that the face has an 'originary'[7] sense that transcends merely empirical considerations. The task of the etymological analysis is to use the analysis of certain words for face in order to recover something of the 'originary' sense of the presence of the face itself and to show that there is no purely empirical appearance of the face without an intrinsic metaphysical meaning. I will claim in this regard that it is the metaphysical meaning that determines the face as ‘Other’ and hence as 'face' and not simply as an 'other' thing. My purpose is to emphasize that the metaphysical meaning of the face is already implicit in the very empirical manifestation of the face as face. The face is not first an empirical manifestation to which then a transcendent metaphysical meaning is added. The metaphysical meaning of the face does rely in some sense on its empirical/literal meaning and must bear some relation to the empirical phenomenon, since the revelation of the face is *through* the empirical presence. There is no metaphysical revelation of the face purely in itself separate from the empirical appearance. But (to paraphrase a Kantian thesis) although all our awareness of the face begins with the empirical appearance, not all awareness simply arises out of the empirical. The face cannot be reduced to its empirical appearance, for in virtue of being a 'face' it is the bearer of ethical and religious values. Yet it cannot bear these values as a pure 'other-worldly' idea. These ethical and religious values are communicated and made manifest through the empirical face, through its facial features. But these features mean more than what is contained in their empirical description. "The face is speaking" says Lévinas. My purpose will be to decipher and to explain the meaning of this key expression of Lévinas' philosophy. I will argue that the face's speaking is fundamentally religious and ethical.

By way of introduction, I will sketch some of the key points in this argument, which will be elaborated in the subsequent chapters. The face that I see is not simply a physical part of the body of another person; it is more than the plastic image that would enclose it. The human face then is not simply what it 'appears' to be. That is to say, it is much more than an instance of a perceived object, a perceptual phenomenon. As Lévinas characterizes it, the face is not a 're-presentation' of something of and by my subjectivity, but a 'presentation', a presenting of what is always actual and present to me: the 'face' of the Other as Other. Yet the face of the Other is actually present as a disturbance in the world between what is in the world and that which exceeds the world. The face breaks through its own plastic 'essence' and divests itself of its own visible, empirical form. Yet the face's breaking through its own plastic essence and divesting itself of its own visible, empirical form is not a property it possesses in a 'thingly' way but a potential that is actual only in and through the face to face encounter. Thus, the face is not a peculiar kind of thing or object with a disturbing property, but a 'disturbing' reality that acquires its significance as such only in and through the face to face relation. The face of the Other is in one sense the common and usual face of any human person. It is this empirically perceived face that makes possible the revelation of the absolutely Other. On the other hand, it is the revelation of the absolutely Other that makes possible the appearance of the empirical face as a face in the first place. The empirically perceived face and the transcendent Other are thus in a sense mutually dependent and mutually implicated.

The transcendent Other is always already implicit in the empirically perceived face and reveals the metaphysical meaning of the face. Lévinas both emphasizes the transcendence of the face, yet maintains that this transcendence does not take place outside the world. The true essence of the person is presented in his face. The face is not only a plastic form but also and more fundamentally the presence 'facing' us. It is in terms of this 'ambiguity' that I will analyze and discuss Lévinas' understanding of the face-to-face relation as both the key concept of the ethical relationship, and as designating the religious meaning of the encounter with the Other. Considered in its empirical presence, the human face is upright. It is also through this face that we encounter the Other and recognize it as 'Other'. The physical and ethical significations 'shape into' one another. The Other is present in his face and faces me without metaphor. In facing another person my attention is orientated toward and by the uppermost part of the Other's body. Yet this 'verticality' is not just an objectively calculable spatial relation but defines the face as bearer of ethical and religious values.

In order to evaluate the metaphysical significance of the face, its 'speaking', I will consider and defend Lévinas's affirmation that the epiphany of the face is the very source of justice, the posture of being-for-the-other prior to being-for-oneself. The presence of the face is not only the simple consequence of looking at the plastic image, but a function of language as well. Its revelation is not given to us in the mode of empirical seeing, but as language in its authentic sense. The face forms the first word, "Thou shalt not commit murder." It is speech, call and interpellation. As speech and glance, the face is not just in the world; it exceeds the totality of all worldly things, and marks the limit of all power and violence. To show that the metaphysical meaning of the face is not to be understood in a narrow way, I will analyze and discuss the meaning of Lévinas' statement that the face signifies a human being in its uniqueness, humility and mortality. The face of the Other is both a moral height and destitution, imposing an infinite obligation on the self and disturbing its equilibrium and egocentrism. Yet the face of the Other is infinitely vulnerable. It has no physical power over me, yet I cannot annihilate it simply by destroying its empirical appearance. The face is the transcendence of the Other which breaks through its own plastic image and orders me "Thou shalt not kill." Lévinas describes our moral actions as responses to what could be called a tacit demand issuing from the Other's face and to which we are passively exposed. A part of my purpose will be to discuss and explain in what sense the face challenges freedom of action and unfolds as a discourse whose first word is obligation to the Other.

The face of the Other is exposed to my gaze. Whatever the countenance that it takes on, whether it belongs to an important person or not, the face is exposed in its nudity and mortality. Lévinas always insists that it is in the face that the supreme authority, God, commands me. The face is the site of the word of God, of the religious meaning of the encounter with the Other. God speaks to the I starting from the face of the Other. It is from the Other's face that meaning itself of the word God comes to mind.

The argument that I will defend in presenting the main ideas of Lévinas' philosophy of the face is that the face carries this absolute spiritual weight as the bearer of ethical and religious value. The face is defined as a permanent challenge addressed to me, though not per se, but in and through the address and the challenge. It challenges my subjectivity by disturbing me, by putting my freedom into question and by forcing me to recognize its metaphysical significance. The face avoids possession and invites me into a relationship that is not a relationship of power. Rather, the relationship with the face is one of kindness, for as Lévinas says, the epiphany of face opens humanity and evokes infinite responsibility for the Other. In this way, the face becomes nearly synonymous with "meaning," "teaching," justice." What is human about "the face" is a moral dimension. "The face" of the Other manifests and is manifest in a moral height that is the dimension of God. The overall aim of my thesis is to show and to argue that the metaphysical meaning of the face is in this way both ethical and religious.

In Chapter 1 I will consider and analyze the empirical meaning of the face in relation to its metaphysical meaning. The main thesis to be outlined throughout Chapter 1 is that the relationship between the empirical and the metaphysical meaning of the face is one of mutual dependence. The face is not simply a physical part of the human body but also the revelation of transcendence. In Chapter 2, I will discuss and analyze the relationship between face, Infinity and God. The main thesis to be outlined in Chapter 2 is that the ideas of God and Infinity bear a fundamental relationship to the concept of face. The direct apprehension of God and Infinity is possible only by welcoming the Other. Religion and Infinity are grounded on the experience of alterity and have a deep ethical significance. The idea of Infinity is not anymore purely theoretical, but moral; religion becomes the social bond between humans in ethical responsibility. In Chapter 3 I will focus upon the significance of the face as bearer of ethical values. In that sense I will consider and analyze Levinas' notion of infinite responsibility for the Other as key concept for defining the face as an ethical challenge addressed by the Other to the Same. Also, I will show how the concept of infinite responsibility for the Other leads to justice, to responsibility for all Others. The overall aim of Chapter 3 is to underline the deep relationship between face and ethics and to show how the ethical discourse about infinite responsibility can be transposed within the mundane world of actions and representations.

In summary then the main objective of my analysis of the key Lévinasian theses concerning the face is to underline its dialectic of revealing / concealing, its epiphany as source of ethical and religious values. The face is an ethical and religious challenge addressed to my existence.

# CHAPTER 1

# THE CONCEPT OF FACE

In this chapter I will begin to consider and analyze the problematic of the empirical/literal meaning of the face in relation to its metaphysical significance. In order to explore the empirical/literal meaning of the face I will discuss the etymology of the word 'face' in the languages spoken by Lévinas. The discussion of the origin and the different connotations of the word 'face' is intended to underline and to clarify the relationship between the meaning of the word 'face' and the meaning of the reality that is the face. There is a strong connection between our very being, our experiences and the words in which we express ourselves. The etymological analysis has the role of showing and emphasizing that the meaning of the word 'face' is not arbitrary, a matter of an indifferent signifier, but that it gives expression to the fundamental experience we have of the reality that is the face. The meaning of the word 'face' preserves a basic and fundamental relationship to the thing, to the physical appearance of the face. Among the different linguistic expressions that we use in our everyday language, the word 'face' seems to be one that exceeds its literal meaning and evokes different feelings, actions and social situations. It is with a view to this 'excess' that I will discuss and analyze some linguistic meanings of the word 'face'. The overall aim of this linguistic analysis is to show that there is no physical manifestation of the face in the first place without at least the 'trace' of a symbolic, figurative meaning.

The main argument of Chapter 1 is that the face cannot be reduced to its empirical appearance. On the one hand, there is no empirical reality of the face purely and simply in itself without there being always already the trace of metaphysical meaning. If we ignore or forget the metaphysical meaning of the face, the empirical reality assumes precedence and the Other is effectively reduced to the Same. On the other hand, the metaphysical meaning is revealed in the first place in and through the physical appearance of the face. The empirical and the metaphysical meaning of the face are interdependent.

## 1.1. The empirical meaning of the face

My analysis of the empirical meaning of the face relies on the argument from etymology. As I have said, the argument from etymology has the purpose of recovering some original senses of the word 'face' that have been forgotten or overshadowed by empirical considerations. The face bears a fundamental relationship to the empirical appearance of the face. The face is, first of all, a physical presence, but, as the argument from etymology will show, this physical presence presupposes symbolical meanings that reflect the presence of the empirical reality *as a face*.

At one level, we name things in order to classify them and to make easier and clearer interpersonal communication. The process of naming things is an operation performed by a knowing subject, by a human being. The knowing subject does not only name things, but he also analyses, examines them and makes different associations and comparisons. In other words, he is not limited to the literal meaning and the empirical presence of the things; he also notices and stresses their suggestive power for designating and evoking different meanings, feelings and situations. There is a strong relationship between the personal experiences of the knowing subject and the words he chooses to express himself.

There is no empirical meaning of the word 'face' that is not always already in some sense metaphysical. Our ability to designate and to describe faces in the empirical world is not simply an empirical matter. The empirical meaning of the face is actually dependent upon a metaphysical meaning. In this respect, the role of the argument from etymology is to make the metaphysical meaning more explicit. But, the argument from etymology does not justify and support directly the metaphysical meanings of the face; it shows that the notion of 'face' presents some original senses that underline its symbolical powers.

The word 'face' works in various different expressions to suggest different feelings, moods, situations and actions. In our daily language we use the English word 'face' in different idioms—'to make/to pull a face', 'to put on a brave face', ' to keep a straight face', 'to be face-to-face'—and with different linguistic meanings—the front of the head, where the eyes, nose and mouth are, or the front or the surface of an object. The full significance of these expressions cannot be understood and explained without analyzing the trace of the metaphysical meaning that is already there in the words and expressions, in particular for our purposes, in the experience of empirical faces. The different linguistic meanings of the word 'face' emphasize that the meaning of the face cannot be reduced to its empirical appearance, that is, the metaphysical meaning is in some sense always already there in the empirical appearance. The face signifies more than what in empirical terms we might typically think.

According to the ordinary meaning, the face constitutes the central zone of the human body where our eyes and mouth are located. In English the word ‘face’ comes from the Latin ‘*facia*’” or ‘*facies*’” meaning form, figure, appearance. ‘*Facies*’ derives from the verb ‘*facere*’, which means ‘to make, to form or shape, to do’, as well as ‘to appear, to shine’. In some Latin languages, such as Italian or Romanian, the word ‘*facere*’ means to do and to create something. In Romanian, the word ‘*facere*’ is often used to designate the creation of the world (*facerea lumii*). The first book of the Bible is also called “*Cartea Facerii*,” namely, the book of the World’s creation/genesis.

According to its Latin etymological root, the word ‘face’ has both a static meaning of something that has appeared and is presented, individualized as having a form or figure, and an active meaning, that of creating, making into a form. As ‘*facere*’, I want to claim, the face ‘gives shape’ to the realm of ethics.

In French, the language in which Lévinas wrote his philosophical works, the word for face is “*visage*.” ‘Visage’ comes from the Latin “*visus*” and derives from the passive voice of the verb “*video, videre*”. As passive voice of the verb “*video, videre*,” “*visus*” has the principal meaning of something seen, a sight, an appearance or a vision. Besides the primary meaning of “appearance,” “aspect,” “*visus*” also has the secondary meaning of the act of seeing or faculty of seeing. A ‘visage’ may not only be the surface and aspect of something, but also seeing or glance. As ‘*visage*’, the face both sees and shows itself for being seen.

The word ‘visage’ also shares the same root as the French verb ‘*viser*’. Both ‘visage’ and ‘*viser*’ come from the Latin ‘*vis*us’. In French, ‘*viser*’ means among other things ‘to aim for’, ‘to be aimed at’, ‘to be affected or concerned by’. For example, ‘Je vise une carrière philosophique’ means ‘I am aiming for a career in philosophy’; ‘*Je me* *sens visée*'—'I feel myself aimed at, i.e., chosen as a target'; '*Cette action vise à nous tester nos capacités*'—'this action aims at testing our capacities'; or *'Cette mesure vise tous les étudiants*' (this measure applies to/concerns all students). Following this linguistic usage of the verb '*viser*', one might say very tentatively that a 'visage' both has aims and is aimed at. It has aims for this or that goal or end, and also 'aims for' itself, that is, for recognition and respect where it aims at being valued for itself and in itself. At the same time it is something aimed at, the subject of the Other's address. In this relation of 'aiming' and 'being aimed at' lie the fundamentals of the ethical relationship.

In Hebrew, the word for 'face' is "*panim*." The word "*panim*" has a multiplicity of meanings and significations. In *The Guide for the Perplexed,*[1] Maimonides discusses these directly. He remarks that most of the meanings of "*panim*" have a figurative character. "*Panim*" can denote the face of a living being, —the most common meaning of the word "*panim*"—, or the feeling of anger, or the presence and existence of a person, or attention and regard. Maimonides pays a special attention to the use of the word "*panim*" with reference to divinity, to God. In *The Old Testament* God says to Moses: "And my face (*panai*) will not be seen." In this expression the word "*panim*" stands for the true existence of God that cannot be comprehended. In other passages of *The Old Testament,* the word "*panim*" has the meaning of blessing (e.g. "The Lord turns his face [*panim*] to thee").

The expression "*panim*" connotes (among other things) the idea of a face that is facing us, or our mutual facing. The Hebrew idiom 'face to face' (*panim el panim*) is used for divine-human encounters and may describe either an adversarial experience or one of extraordinary intimacy. In Exodus 33:11 it is written that "the Lord speaks to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." The encounter with God is determined here in terms of the human 'face to face' as a man speaks to his friends. It describes a direct and intimate relationship. It seems that Lévinas' understanding of the significance of the face is very close to this Hebrew meaning. As I will show in Chapter 3, for Lévinas 'face to face' is a way of expressing the intensity of an encounter with the divine Other, the overwhelming nature of the mysterious contact with the God through the Other's face.

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[1] Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed,* trans. by M. Friedländer., London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956, pp. 52-53

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the face is a basic datum of our everyday life and experience. Without a face human beings could not be perceived and individualized. It is through the face that we are first perceived and recognized as individuals. In our everyday language we use the word 'face' in order to identify and to designate a person. We recognize a person, a friend by seeing his/her face. Or when we meet somebody who looks like some other person we say, "I know this face." We also use the word 'face' in many expressions that designate different social positions and intersubjective relationships. In English, the expression "face saving" means "done so that other people will continue to respect you." As we can see from the meaning of the expression "face saving," the notion of face has a deep social meaning designating the full recognition of the individual's embeddedness in the social network. "Face-saving" refers to protecting a positive social image before others.

It may be interesting also to notice briefly the generally familiar role that the notion of ‘face’ plays in Chinese, (even though this goes beyond my proviso of keeping to the languages that Lévinas spoke). In doing so, my intention is simply to emphasize the transcendent social meaning of face.

The face is often defined in terms of the projection of one's social self in the public domain. The Chinese expressions ‘having face’, ‘losing face’ or ‘gaining face’ underline the particular Chinese sensitivity to the face. ‘To have face’ means to command social influence over others. A person who ‘has face’ is in a position to exercise considerable influence and control over others. Face may be lost from one's failure to meet social expectations or when one violates social norms. The face can be gained when one’s individual’s dignity is recognized by the all members of the society.

The special role played by the notion of ‘face’ in the above-mentioned expressions emphasizes the face’s particular significance in defining and assessing the human being’s individuality and social image. In this regard, the linguistic meaning of the word ‘face’ bears symbolic connotations that announce cultural and metaphysical significances.

One can remark too upon the extensive use of the word ‘face’ across different fields of activity. The concept of façade within the domain of architecture serves as an illuminating example. In architecture, the word ‘façade’, which comes from the word ‘face’, represents and denotes the exterior of a building. It is the façade of the building, moreover, that is often the most important part from a design standpoint as it sets the tone for the rest of a building. It is the façade that always contains the main point of entry into a building. As containing the main point of entry into a building, the façade can be seen as an invitation to explore the inner beauties of an architectural monument.

For Lévinas, architecture is perhaps the first among the fine arts (*beaux-arts*). In *Totality and Infinity*, he discusses the implications of the word 'façade' and remarks:

> It is art that endows things with something like façade—that by which objects are not only seen, but are also as objects in an exhibition. The darkness of matter would denote the state of a being that precisely has no façade...By the façade, the thing which keeps its secret is exposed enclosed in its monumental essence and in its myths... It captivates by its grace as by magic, but does not reveal itself. If the transcendent cuts across sensibility, if it is openness preeminently, if its vision is the vision of the very openness of being, it cuts down the vision of forms and can be stated neither in terms of contemplation nor in terms of practice.[2]

Both the face and its derivative façade are a means of identification. As Lévinas notices, a matter without façade cannot be identified because it is located in darkness. It is the façade that makes it to be "something" or "somebody" in the world. To be in the darkness means not to be distinguished and identified as something, having its own characteristics and personality. It is to be one as all others and not the one among the others. In *Totality and Infinity* Lévinas chooses the example of architecture in order to move his discussion from the 'sensibility' of the face to the ethics of the face. Like the façade in the architecture, the face represents the central point of the human being, the way in which he/she is recognized and individualized. The façade is the key of the architectural design and must be the most beautiful part of the building. The most significant, immediate contact of the visitor with an architectural monument takes place through its façade. The case of the face is the same as that of the façade. It is through the face that we take notice of the Other's presence and existence. But, the welcoming of the Others' face is not limited to the empirical manifestation of the face as an object. Like the façade, the face contains the key, the 'main door' for entering and exploring the depths of the human being. Lévinas says that in the case of architecture, the façade captivates by its grace and magic, but does not reveal itself. The significance of the Other's face exceeds the physical manifestation and constitutes itself as a phenomenon that can never be encompassed. We see both the face and the façade, they are, as Lévinas says, objects of exhibition, but they signify more than we actually see and perceive. Both face and façade transcend the horizon of the subject in relation to the world of perceived empirical objects; the façade captivates by its magic and cuts down the vision of forms by representing the very openness of the architectural monument while the sensible face transcends the horizon of the egocentric world.

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[2] E. Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Trans. Alphonso Lingis, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2002, p. 193

There is a sense in which Lévinas says that in architectural monuments the transcendent cuts across sensibility. At its origin architecture (as opposed to constructing kinds of shelter) was conceived as a way of glorifying and celebrating a divinity, a way of connecting the human being with the absolute. Architecture is a vision of a building suspended in the future, reflecting the aspiration towards the divinity. Like the originary significance of architecture, the face is the way in which the Other presents himself. Both the face and the façade signify more than an actual and concrete presence.

The analysis of the etymology and the various meanings of the word of 'face' suggest that "the face" signifies originally more than just the objective empirical image or plastic form. The empirical face always already transcends the empirical 'image' of its appearance as a face. As Jeffrey Dudiak remarks: "The notion of face clearly transcends any correlation to the face as a phenomenal object offered to my knowing, in that the face in Lévinas' sense destroys any such image."[3]

## 1.2. The epiphany of the face

The main thesis to be introduced and preliminarily sketched in this section is that the face is not simply a physical part of the human body but also a revelation of transcendence. To anticipate the thesis, (as I have already repeatedly stated), the human face is not simply what empirically it seems to be; it is much more than an instance of a perceived object and an instance of a kind called, 'face'.

To start my outline, I will turn to the third section of Lévinas' *Totality and Infinity*, the first chapter of which, entitled "The Face and Sensibility," opens with questions regarding the way in which we are aware of another's face and how it offers itself to our gaze. "Is not the face given to vision?" Lévinas asks. "How does the epiphany as a face determine a relationship different from that, which characterizes all our sensible experience?"[4] The basic question here is by what sort of 'knowledge' are we aware of another's face as such, what sort of experience or perception is presupposed and demanded for our being able to see and to receive the revelation of the face, and how is this 'knowledge' like or unlike our ordinary vision of sensible objects. Referring to this chapter of *Totality and Infinity*, Peperzak says that the chapter is concerned to provide an epistemological analysis of the peculiar sort of knowledge that we have about the Other's face. According to Peperzak, Lévinas addresses this question as a question about the difference between the epiphany of the Other to me and the discovery of a phenomenon and relation I have to it through immediate 'enjoyment' and perception. Both perception and enjoyment are taken together under the name of sensible experience. Peperzak writes: "In a discussion of various epistemologists, Lévinas tries to show that both sensibility and the peculiar awareness of the face differ—but in different ways—from representational knowledge."[5] According to Peperzak, sensibility is not for Lévinas an unsuccessful attempt at acquiring knowledge, but is rather affectivity and, more precisely, enjoyment.

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[3] Jeffrey Dudiak, *The Intrigue of Ethics*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2001, p. 64

[4] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.187

As in the case of sensibility that can be reduced to the order of representation; the vision of the face cannot be reduced to representation. For Lévinas, vision has a privileged sense. It does not mean that vision is more important than touch, smell or hearing. These senses provide each in its own way a connection and relationship with the exterior world. In the case of the touch, smell or hearing we make contact only with some aspects of the exterior things. Through vision we see the exterior objects at least in perspectival outline in their full manifestation and appearance.

Vision has a privileged sense within the framework of Lévinas' conception of alterity for it is through vision that I become aware of the Other's presence. The term of "privileged" should be understood as "significant and suggestive." It is through his eyes that the Other calls my freedom into discussion and orders me to obey and to respect the ethical commandments. An empiricist will say that the look and the welcome of the face are simply inferences we make from the sense object. The face is just another object present in front of us and does not make any claim upon us. The meaning of the face is then only added on *to* the empirical representation. The symbolical meanings we attribute to the eyes and to the vision are, according to the empiricist view, only an inference we make starting from phenomena, representations.

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[5] Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel* Lévinas, West Lafayette IN: Purdue University Press, 1993, p. 162

A clear response to the empiricist objections can be found in E.L. Fackenheim's book *Quest for Past and Future.*[6] In the chapter entitled "On the Eclipse of God," Fackenheim discusses the question of faith from two different points of view: Russsell's and Buber's visions. Russell states the subjectivist- reductionist view according to which the faith, the love for God, is just a state of the man who feels it and not properly a relational fact. Faith is just a subjective state and thus does not have any objective or universal validity. Buber rejects this view by stating that the great images of God fashioned by mankind are born, not of sheer imagination working on its own, but of real encounters with Divine power and glory. According to Buber, the man does not create the concept of God starting from private feelings from which he infers the Divine. Rather the concept is an attempt to articulate a real experience and encounter. The empiricist and subjective-reduction objection to an account like Buber's is that the human subjective imagination is itself the source all these images and feelings supposedly related to God. Statements of faith simply refer to the subjective states of the person reporting, and do not state a relational fact between the person and God. But Fackenheim answers at this subjectivist-reductionist objection by offering for consideration an alternative thesis, that is, that the self is primordially open to the Other selves. As self-conscious selves we already are in relation to Other selves as a condition of our being self-conscious. If we were not already in relation to Other selves, we would never become a self at all. We become an 'I' only in a relation of openness to a 'Thou'.

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[6] E.L. Fackenheim, *Quest for Past and Future: Eessays in Jewish Philosophy,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968, pp. 229-244

Likewise, the face cannot be seen just as a matter of making inferences from empirical data. As I suggested in the previous section when I discussed the argument from etymology, the face cannot be reduced to its physical appearance, to empirical data, as the very language of face involves a greater meaning. We see a face not just by indicating objective items of perceptual data—two patches of blue we then call 'eyes', that red patch we then call 'nose, etc—but by seeing a meta-physical meaning that is the face. Indeed, the data are data of the face only in virtue of a metaphysical meaning always already implied in the experience of the face as an empirical thing. It is through face that we are perceived and individualized. If the face were reduced to empirical data and phenomena, it could not individualize us for every human being has a face with the same features. One can object that the facial features can distinguish and individualize us, for the color of eyes, the shape of face are different from person to person. But, the question is whether these empirical differences with respect to the facial features are sufficient alone to distinguish us. The answer is that the facial features are not sufficient to individualize us. It is something that comes through the empirical image, a personality that is particular and individual and seen directly to be so. There is the saying that 'the eyes are the soul's mirror' and this serves to underline that the face cannot be reduced to a collection of empirical data. The 'light in the eyes' is not an empirical fact but a meaning. As I noted in the previous section when I analyzed the etymology of the

English word 'face', one of the meanings of the Latin '*facere*'" is 'to shine'. Hence, there is an inner life of the human subject that shines through the face, especially in the eyes. Many times we do not need to express our thoughts or feelings through words; we can transmit and show them by expressions of the face: a smile or a tear. But a smile is not just teeth shone, nor is tear water from the eyes; they are meanings that transcend these data.

The empiricist approach to the face sees it as a simple phenomenon in the world whereas it seems to me self-evident that the face is much more than an objective empirical phenomenon. We can regard faces simply as empirical phenomena, but that would be to serve some particular cognitive end, not how we actually experience the face as face. When we meet the Other's face, for instance, we do not look at it just as an empirical thing among many others. When we encounter a face we see it as standing for a person, for her inner life and we can distinguish a message, a look that says something about herself and about us. When we meet a face we are careful about its expression. If it is smiling it means that the person enjoys our company, or if it is indifferent it means that the Other does not care too much about us. We always look carefully at the face of the persons we encounter in order to realize what is going on in their soul and mind. An empiricist cannot deny it, because this attitude towards the face is manifest in every moment of our intersubjective relationships. In our everyday life, we do not see and describe the face as a complex figure that can be portrayed by a picture or painting by arranging empirical data. We do not see the face just as a plastic image. We try to discover and to analyze what we see and feel when the Other looks at us.

The empiricist can reject out of hand the hypothesis that the face is bearer of ethical values, but not that the face is more than an empirical phenomenon. That the face is bearer of ethical values can be proved by our basic concern for the message transmitted by the Other's face. We care about the message transmitted by the Other's face and we cannot be indifferent to it. If we define ethics—as Lévinas does—as the calling into question of my freedom by the presence of the Other, the attention we give to the expression of the Other's face already marks the beginning of any ethical behavior.

Without embracing empiricism, one might still object that the meaning of the face is never given as something unique but always involves some sort of reduction of the Other to the Same. The non-empiricist theses of Husserl and Heidegger, for example, agree that the self's apprehension of the Other transcends the empirical but nonetheless is a matter of reducing the Other to the Same by making the presence of the Other dependent upon some common meaning. Husserl states that the Other is an alter ego, an ego similar to me that I constitute through an analogical 'appresentation'. According to Husserl, the Other is present 'in flesh and blood', but I don't know anything about what he thinks or feels. The Other is "appresented" through his body; he is perceived, under the specific manner of the appresentation, as homologous with the primordial ego who I am. In other words, at the origin of experience, both self and Other constitute the world in essentially the same way. The system of 'world constitution' is one we always already share, presupposed by both self and other. The analogical appresentation indicates the fact that the Others' world, the world that belongs to their 'phenomenal system' must be directly experienced as being coincident with the world of my 'phenomenal system' right from the start. For Husserl, self and Other share the same essential meanings rooted in their common intersubjective constitution of the world. Because we all constitute the world in essentially the same way, we are able to 'intuit' the Other as an alter ego like me directly and without a complex of empiricist inferences.

Yet Lévinas' conception of the face speaks against the empiricist and this non-empiricist view alike. According to Lévinas, the empiricist view ignores the symbolical meaning of the face and just reduces it to a simple phenomenon like many others. The empiricist view sees the face as a simple part of the human body and does not recognize the message transmitted by it, its metaphysical and ethical meaning. In doing so, the empiricist cannot account for how the face can be present as a face in the first place. Lévinas also rejects the non-empiricist view of Husserl, for he considers that Husserl's assertion that "alter means alter ego" serves to refuse all genuine alterity by reducing the Other essentially to my self as self and Other are implicated in a common set of meaning intentions. But this is to deny the essential importance of the otherness of the Other as a real moment of my life. As such, it constitutes fundamentally a 'violence' toward the Other. To make of the Other an alter ego means to neutralize his absolute alterity. Likewise, Lévinas rejects the notion of alter ego because it asserts the pre-eminence of my liberty (to constitute the Other ) to the prejudice of moral justice. "The neighbor as neighbor is not only an alter ego. He is what I am not. The decorum and the daily life make us to believe that the Other is known through sympathy as an Other myself, as an alter ego."[7]

Lévinas also rejects Heidegger's account of alterity. According to Lévinas,

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[7] Lévinas, *Time and the Other,* Trans. Richard A. Cohen, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987, p. 36

Heidegger's fundamental ontology subordinates the relationship between beings to the structures of Being, or what is the same, subordinates metaphysics to ontology. To assert the priority of ontology over metaphysics means to subordinate ethics to the self's freedom and its letting beings be in ontological (self) understanding in a way that essentially reduces the Other to the Same. Heidegger's concept of freedom represents the self-identification of the Same as the sameness of our being and our ontological understanding, which does not allow itself to be alienated by the Other as other. In "Is Ontology Fundamental?" Lévinas states that Heidegger bases "being-with-the-other-person" (*Miteinandersein*) on the ontological relation between our self-being and Being. In other words, "being-with-the-other-person" is a relation to the Other based on a prior context of ontological meaning within which alone the Other can be actually present to me as Other. What is primordial in this relation is my understanding of and relation to the context of meaning, and how I let beings be in terms of it, not my actual individual relation to any actual other person. In Heidegger's philosophy then the Same takes priority over the Other and thus the Other is reduced to the Same. For Lévinas, this kind of reduction does not do justice to the alterity of the Other. Rather for Lévinas the Same discovers itself as a specific subject only because it is answerable to another. The Other always precedes me and I am infinitely responsible toward him. The requirement of treating Others with respect is the very condition of our own responsibility. Morality begins when freedom is not justified by itself, but feels itself to be arbitrary and violent.

The face is not just an inference we make from phenomena or representations, nor is its meaning some form of a reduction of the Other to the Same. If the Other reduced to the Same, the face would lose its capacity of expression and suggestion. It would become a simple copy of the Same, a manifestation of its powers; it would be a simple thing among other things. But the face cannot be reduced to a simple phenomenon; it has a symbolical meaning. The face is epiphany and origin of ethical values. These ethical values are transmitted and suggested through the face, through the Other's eyes that look at us and oblige us to follow and respect the moral commandments.

Vision plays a fundamental role in defining the face and alterity. Lévinas grants a special significance to vision and to the eyes for, according to him, we cannot distinguish and reveal the meaning of the alterity without analyzing the sense of vision.

The privileged significance of vision underscores the ethical language of the face. Eyes, vision dominate our contact with things. One might argue that in relation to Others it is the voice, being called by name as God calls Adam, and Abraham and Moses, not what we look at, that is more fundamental. But we do not have to forget about the silent language of the eyes; the eyes can "speak" and communicate by their expression what the mouth does through spoken words. Vision has a privileged significance, for it welcomes the Other as he is. According to Lévinas, the real can be apprehended without intermediation of a concept; the face can be directly apprehended. The metaphysical relation cannot be properly speaking representation, for the Other would dissolve into the Same. "Thus, within the work of intentionality, representation occupies the place of a privileged event. The intentional relation of representation… is in relation with the other but in such way that the other does not determine the same; it is always the same that determines the other. To be sure, representation is the seat of truth: the movement proper to truth consists of the thinker being determined by the object presented to him."[8]

Representation cannot constitute the primordial relation with the Other. In representation, the Same defines the Other without being determined by the Other; it is only a one way relationship. Representation is a non-reciprocal determination of the Other by the Same. "To represent is to reduce to the present an actual perception which flows on. To represent is not to reduce a past fact to an actual image but to reduce to the instantaneousness of thought everything that seems independent of it."[9]

In the essay "Levi-Bruhl and Contemporary Philosophy" included in *Entre-Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other,* Lévinas says that representation must be understood as a theoretical, contemplative attitude. Before acting, before feeling, one must represent to oneself the being that will receive the action. Representation describes an act whose origin relies on the Same and which thus does not discover, properly speaking, anything before itself. The Same relating to the Other within the act of representation refuses everything that is exterior to its own instant. Representation reveals nothing of the world to us.

The welcoming of the Other takes place through the face which cannot be reduced to its phenomenal presence. To reduce the face to its empirical presence means to see the Other's coming to the fore as a variation of the general way of appearance of all phenomenal beings. That is, the face will lose any capacity of individualization and will become a phenomenon among many others. Reduced to its physical appearance the face will always be subject of injustice and totalitarian acts. It will become a simple object of representational knowledge.

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[8] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.124

[9] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.127

For Lévinas, the concept of 'phenomenon' is reserved only for realities that fit into the totality of beings ruled by egological understanding. But the Other can never be an object or theme of knowledge and cannot be reduced to the Same. Lévinas opposes to the notion of the Other's knowledge. For him, if the Other were known, he would not be the Other. To know, to possess are synonyms of the power and they make themselves manifest by the oppressive identity of the Same. These verbs belong to a philosophy of violence, because they did not respect the Other in his being.

The Other presented through his face is radically different from all other beings in the world. He cannot become a moment of a totality, a phenomenon. The Other comes to the fore through what Lévinas calls 'epiphany of the face'.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'epiphany' means manifestation of a God. In everyday use it also can mean sudden revelation or insight in the nature or essence of some matter. From the etymological point of view, the word 'epiphany' comes from the Greek '*epiphainein*' that means 'to shine upon', 'to manifest', or 'to make known'. In Greek, the prefix 'epi' means variously 'above, over, on, upon, besides, in addition to, toward, among'. When the prefix 'epi' is used with reference to a person it underlines the fact that something is presented and showed to that person; the self-showing cannot be separate from the Other. The face is epiphany namely because it shows the Other to me, because it addresses me and calls my freedom into question. It does so not in a Sartrean sense that the look of the Other challenges my freedom in the world, but because the epiphany of the Other subsumes my freedom into responsibility for the Other.

In the ancient Greek, the word '*epiphaneia*' symbolizes the feast of the embodied gods that come forth on the earth. Within Christian culture, the word 'epiphany' designates Jesus' manifestation of Himself as God and celebrates the many ways that Christ has made Himself known to the world. It is in epiphany – His baptism by John the Baptist- that Jesus manifested to humankind His own divinity. Thus, the word 'epiphany' has strong religious and Biblical connotations, basically pointing towards the manifestation and presence of the divine within our world.

As epiphany, the face cannot be reduced to what is immediately seen and perceived, for it is the essence and the meaning of any ethical relationship. As I will show in the section dedicated to the relationship between the Idea of the Infinite and the face of the Other, the epiphany of the face makes possible an insight into the fundamentals of the relationship toward the Other and reveals its basic rules. The epiphany of the face is mediation between God and the Other. The face breaks through its own plastic image and divests itself of its own form as sign of the Other's transcendence.

The epiphany of the face is the *disturbance* between the world and that which exceeds the world. Lévinas emphasizes the transcendence of the face, but also maintains that this transcendence does not take place outside the world. The true essence of the man is presented in his face. In *Alterity and Transcendence,* Lévinas says that if we see the face only as plastic form with color, proportions, shade, we see a phenomenon comparable to the other phenomena, but will not see the face as facing us. The human face is not phenomenon, but rather epiphany that resists conceptual grasp. It gives itself otherwise than as a visible configuration and manifests itself otherwise than as idea or image.

> The apparition of a phenomenon is the emergence of a form into the light of a certain space-time… The encounter with the human Other, however, is not the union of an act by which two potential beings identify with one another in the transparency of a perception, or a concept, but rather a shock which, by its non-apparition, refutes the pretension of the I, which appropriates everything that stands in its way. The Other shows itself in a different manner; his way of " being" is other than the being of phenomenon.[10]

The face is expression that manifests the presence of being but not simply by drawing aside the veil of the phenomenon. It appears, but remains absent, being above all appeal and teaching entry into the ethical realm of the alterity.

## 1.3. The metaphysical meaning of the face

To summarize the thesis thus far: the face cannot be reduced to what is immediately seen and perceived, to its empirical manifestation. Nor can it be an empirical manifestation as a face without the trace of a metaphysical meaning. The face is present to us in its physical form, but, at the same time, it exceeds its plastic image and disturbs our world. A metaphysical meaning is already presupposed in the appearance of the empirical face as a face in the first place. The metaphysical meaning of the face has deep moral implications; it opens and makes possible the ethical discourse and relationship with the Other. It is these latter claims I want now to clarify further.

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[10] Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel* Lévinas, p. 63

As epiphany, the face is not only appearing, presentation, but presentation/appearing *for*. It is not a simple phenomenon in the world, but an enigma, that as such is a call for ethics and justice. The face of the Other is present *to* me *for* the sake of being recognized and respected. It is present to me also *for* the sake of calling my freedom into question and discovering myself as a moral agent. The metaphysical meaning of the face is deeply ethical for it sets up the fundamentals of any moral relationship with the Other.

The metaphysical meaning of the face bears a fundamental relationship with the empirical meaning of the face. On one hand, the empirical meaning relies on the metaphysical meaning and, on the other hand, there is no metaphysical meaning without a relation to the empirical. In "Violence and Metaphysics,"[11] Derrida remarks that if the face of the Other were not also present in a spatial exteriority, we would still have to distinguish between soul and body, between a true, non-spatial face and its mask as a spatial figure for the face to be at all. If we could not, the entire metaphysics of the face would collapse. If the physical dimension is denied to the face, then it becomes like a metaphor without any correspondence and connection with the literal reality of the empirically present. Therefore, the analysis and the discussion of the metaphysical meaning of the face cannot be simply separated from the consideration of the empirical manifestation of the face.

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[11] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, Trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 115

In *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas emphasizes many times that the concept of 'face' does not refer to the physical appearance of the face, to its facial features as empirically designated. The meaning of the face is deeper than the empirical meaning given by the effective presentation of the face. The face is expression and epiphany; it is the concrete figure of the alterity in which it acquires the meaning of *Being–for-the-Other. Being–for-the-Other* emphasizes the metaphysical meaning of the face, its fundamental ethical call. The fact itself of talking about the face as the face of the Other underlines the ethical meaning of the face as annihilation of the egological discourse and opening towards the Other.

Lévinas never talks about the face of the Same, but only about the face of the Other. If he discussed and analyzed the face of the Same, the face would designate the realm of ego-centric subjectivity and the commonality of subjects and the epiphany of the Other, the revelation of the Other as beyond my powers. As Peperzak notes in *To the Other,* the otherness of the Other is concretized in the face of another human. Another comes to the fore as Other only if his/her appearance breaks, pierces, destroys the horizon of my egocentric monism.

But who is this Other? It seems that a certain ambiguity characterizes Lévinas' concept of the Other. Sometimes he talks about an absolute, infinite Other and other times about the Other as my neighbor. Sometimes Lévinas capitalizes the word "Other," other times not. The ambiguity of the concept of Other is the ambiguity between the Other as my neighbor and the Other as designating the otherness of God, the Most High. This ambiguity between the human Other and the divine Other has the role to underline that there is no revelation of the divine Other except in and through the relation to the human Other. As I will show in Chapter 3, I can encounter the divine Other only by answering at the ethical call of infinite responsibility for the human Other. The divine Other manifests and is manifest in our world through the ethical commandments. By practicing and respecting the divine commandments of ethical behavior towards the human Other, I can encounter and "experience" the divine Other, God.

As I have pointed out in Introduction, Lévinas prefers to use the term 'autrui' (the Other) instead of '*autre*' (an other) when speaking of the Other as person. His preference can be understood and justified specifically in the light of his rejection of the Husserl's notion of "alter ego" wherein the ego designates the Other as alter ego and thus simply as 'other' (*autre*) and hence as *essentially* the same. But Lévians presents an account of the Other as *'autrui'* that is "beyond essence." In "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida discusses the etymology of the French word "*autrui.*"[12] He notes that '*autrui*' has its origin in the Latin expression "*alter huic.*" *Huic* is the dative case of the demonstrative pronoun: *hic-haec-hoc*. According to Derrida, the dative together with the vocative is the original direction of language (as, e.g., "I spoke *to him*"). I would add that the accusative is, also, for Lévinas, the original direction of language as designating the essence of the ethical discourse. The dative, the accusative and the vocative rob the Same of its central position because with them one speaks "of" or "to" something other, or one "addresses" someone else (*alter*). In this speech, the Same is not simply by and for itself, but is obligated to respond and be 'responsible' (i.e., "committed," from *spondeo*,

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[12] Jacques Derrida Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, p. 105

"I commit") for the Other as addressing and addressed. Rooted in these three cases, the essence of language is thus ethical, for it designates through the vocative, the accusative and the dative things for, to and of the Other. The accusative underlines the subordination of the Same to the Other; the Same can only be "accused" and made responsible for the Other. The Same is a self in the accusative, passive in his exposure to the Other and thus infinitely obliged to respond to the Other's call. It is the Other who "accuses" me and obliges me to respond 'me voici' (here I am). No one can take my place; I am the one called and I am obliged to answer. In 'me voici' the pronoun 'je' ( I) is in the accusative that stresses that 'je' is possessed by the Other. The self who responds is "me" under assignation, "me" deprived of first person status designated by the nominative.

Through the dative, the world is given to the Other. In *Totality and Infinity* Lévinas says that to recognize the Other is to give. That is to say, the Same respects the Other by giving to the Other in and through language. The Other presents himself to me; the world is no longer mine, no longer what I possess, but what I give to the Other by speaking to him. Hence, language is primordially an act of generosity that responds to the advent of the face by offering my world to the Other. In offering what is mine to the Other, I recognize the priority of the Other and I put myself in the second place. That is, I recognize the Other's voice, which addresses and accuses me. Through the vocative that is defined as the language of interpellation the Same is interpellated and called upon to speak and to recognize his infinite responsibility for the Other.

According to "Le Petit Robert" (edition 1996) the word '*autrui*" is certified in French for the first time in 1080 as indefinite pronoun and under the form of "*altrui*" — *altrui* being the origin of the concept of 'altruism'. As indefinite pronoun, 'autrui' is the regimen case of 'autre' (another), which is to say, that 'autre' is derived from *'autrui'* and not vice versa, as the philosophy of the Same would have it. Yet, in the old French, this regimen case expresses the grammatical functions other than that of subject. *'Autrui'* (The Other), as regimen case of *'autre'*(another) cannot be subject; it is always the object of a verb or of a preposition and never the subject of a sentence. When used in French, *Autrui* (the Other) is most frequent with reference to an action with ethical value and/or assessed from a moral point of view. Derrida asserts that Lévinas chooses 'autrui' for its ambivalence, because it indicates both the alterity and the rapprochement, often having the meaning of neighbor. As 'autrui', the Other is always present in my life, but, at the same time, he always escapes me, my powers.

In *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas says that the face is the way in which the Other presents himself exceeding the idea of the Other in me. The presence of the Other is a fulfillment always over-flowing the intention. The Other presents himself to me through his face that, as a fulfillment over-flowing intention, can never simply be encompassed and assimilated. Its mode of presentation is described as an 'exceeding'. As an exceeding, the face cannot be adequately or truly hypostatized in any way; it is an active surplus over the plastic image that would enclose it. Hence. I cannot truly reduce the Other to the order of representation. The face of the Other is present to me, it is here and now, it stays in front of me but yet it destroys and overflows its plastic image, any possible idea that I could have about it. The way in which the Other presences itself to me does not consist in figuring him as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The Other cannot be known and thus assimilated and reduced to the Same, but just welcomed.

An inherent question that arises while talking about "the face "is exactly how this extraordinary event called 'face' appears and exceeds its physical presence. In *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas answers this question by means of the conceptual figure of facial expression. Facial expression does not impose itself as a true representation or as an action. Indeed, the face' *is* expression par excellence and manifests itself as the nonadequation of expressing and expressed. The face manifests itself over and beyond its form. As Lévinas claims in *Totality and Infinity*, the life of expression consists in undoing the form in which the existent is thereby at once revealed and dissimulated. Lévinas chooses the word 'expression' to designate the way in which the empirical appearance of the face turns and reveals its metaphysical meaning, the term being appropriate because an expression cannot be encompassed nor can it be understood as the object of an epistemic relation. In and through expression, the face presents itself in and as its refusal to be contained. The face expresses essentially through eyes. When we talk about the expression of the face we generally mean the expression of the eyes, their light or shining. If there are tears in the eyes we say that the expression of the face is sad. But there is also the smile of the mouth that can suggest the happiness, the good mood of a person. When we assert that the face expresses essentially through the eyes we want to underline the eyes' power of expressing and revealing what is in the human soul, its deepest feelings and thoughts. If the mouth needs spoken words in order to make manifest its message, the eyes don't need anything but themselves. The un-spoken language of the eyes is a language without words, a language in which the look, the expression of the eyes can express a deep message. In what follows I will discuss and analyze Levinas' assertion that "the eyes are speaking" and I will show that the eyes' speaking is deeply ethical.

If the face presents itself to us precisely as exceeding any idea we could form of it, this means that the face cannot be reduced to its physical presentation. The plastic form designates only the aesthetic dimension of the face, not its exceeding, its epiphany and ethical meaning. If we look at the face in order to check proportions, color or shades we will see only a phenomenon comparable to any other, but will not see that "the face is speaking." "The face is speaking" is the favorite expression used by Lévinas for describing the face, its epiphany. The speaking of the face consists in the unspoken language of the eyes. The mouth need not say or pronounce any words; only the eyes, the glance solicit. Lévinas prefers to talk about the language of the eyes and the expression of the glance, for as he says in *Totality and Infinity,* the language of the eyes cannot dissemble. The eye does not speak, but shines. As I underlined in the section 2 above, Lévinas puts a special emphasis on eyes/vision, reserving for it a privileged sense. Vision characterizes the sphere of intelligibility, the meaningful, and not just the physically 'seen'. The structure of seeing presupposes the seeing that has the seen for its object or theme; it is found in all the modes of sensibility having access to things. Thus, the epiphany of the face is 'visitation', instigation. While the phenomenon is already image, the epiphany of the face is alive and active: "the face is speaking." The face is speaking through its eyes. I become aware of the face's speaking by looking at the Other, at the expression of his eyes.

The speaking of the face does not depend on the fact that somebody else addresses me, speaking about something or about somebody. If it were so, it would mean that I communicate with the Other on equal terms. It would be a simple dialogue or communication between two equal subjects. As exceeding any idea that I can have about it, the face of the Other presupposes more: it expresses itself. What it expresses is an ethical command to infinite responsibility for the Other.

In *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas writes that the face is speaking; the face is the signifier that appears on the top of its sign, like eyes looking at you. "The face is speaking" and forms the first word for the Other is the giver of a sense which precedes my own meaning. The speaking of the face takes the features of an appeal, call, interpellation; it privileges grammatical forms like the accusative, the dative and the vocative. The accusative 'accuses' me, my freedom and orders me through the vocative to exceed the circle of my own subjectivity and to answer to the Other's call. Since the speech of the Other's face privileges the vocative, the dative and the accusative, the face is not something seen, observed and understood, but rather somebody responded to. I can only respond to the order and to the call of a face. The face of the Other speaks, claims and addresses me. The acts of speaking, claiming and addressing belong to the sphere of language. That is, the epiphany of the face, its presentation to me takes place by means of the language. The epiphany of the face is wholly language, since "in a face the expressed attends its expression, expresses its very expression, always remains master of the meaning it delivers."[13]

The epiphany of the face is wholly language for its manifestation is first discourse, expression. The face is not only the simple consequence of looking at, but language as well. It cuts through the realm of sense experience; its revelation is not given to us in the mode of seeing, but as language in its authentic sense.

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[13] Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel* Lévinas, p. 111

The face of the Other can pronounce and make heard its call and message without any intermediation. It speaks and addresses me directly without the intermediary of any image. To speak to me is at each moment to surmount what is necessarily plastic in manifestation and to underline the metaphysical significance of the face, its nudity. "To manifests himself as a face is to impose oneself above and beyond the manifest and purely phenomenal form, to present oneself in a mode irreducible to manifestation, the very straight forwardness of the face to face, without the intermediary of any image, in one's nudity." [14]

At a conference at the University of Leyden, in March 1975, T.C. Frederikse confesses to Lévinas that while reading *Totality and Infinity* he had the impression that the face of the Other emerges as it were from nothingness and thus gives it a ghostly character in Lévinas' philosophy. Lévinas answers:

> The Other must be received independently of his qualities, if he is to be received as Other. If it were not for this, which is a certain immediacy—it is even immediacy par excellence; the relationship to the Other is the only one to have no value except when it is immediate—then the rest of my analyses would lose all their force. The relationship would be one of these thematizable relations that are established between objects. It seems to me that forgetting all of these "incitements" to thematization were the only manner for the Other to count as

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[14] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.200

Other.[15]

Hence there is a kind of overlap between the metaphysical meaning of the face and its empirical self-presentation. In order to grasp the epiphany of the face, its unspoken language, I have to see the face itself, the eyes, their glance. What Lévinas means by face is fundamentally the physical face, but a face that is always on the move, the physical face being always already more than physical, it being 'meta-physical'. It does not enclose itself in the empirical form, but breaks through its own plastic essence.

The face as expression is a combination of glance and speech, which is the way in which the face accomplishes its breakthrough or divesture of form. In this breakthrough or divesture of form, the face forms the first word "Thou shalt not commit murder."

The Other's face is the only object I ever encounter that signifies actively and verbally and whose metaphysical signification is both summons and interdiction. I cannot reduce the Other's epiphany to an image, a concept, or a work. Although the face belongs to the arena of visibility, it also manifests an opposition and resistance to any image or representation. I can only meet and welcome the Other. When I meet and welcome the Other I can see his countenance nude and bare. The Other is present in flesh; his questioning glance is seeking for a meaningful response. This response turns to me an order. Hence the empirical countenance transgresses itself and bears a metaphysical meaning. The face is the transcendence of the Other which breaks through its own plastic image and orders me "Thou shalt not kill."

The face of the Other is infinitely vulnerable; it has no physical power over me, but I may not destroy it. It remains inviolable, because the face transcends the world. I can kill it, but I can never annihilate its message and expression. When one says that the face transcends the world one does not point at the empirical face, at its physical features. What transcends the world is its metaphysical significance, its ethical call and message. During the Holocaust, the Nazis tried to exterminate the Jews, to destroy their nation, 'their face', but by killing a great number of Jews, the Nazis could not annihilate and make disappear the Jewish identity and culture. Though one can try to destroy the empirical face, one cannot still annihilate its power of expression, its metaphysical meaning. The face of the Other always transcends the world by keeping its metaphysical and symbolical meaning. Also, the face of the Other transcends my world because its meaning is prior to my own meaning; it is speech, call and interpellation. As speech and glance, the face is not in the world; it exceeds the totality and marks the limit of all power and violence.

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[15] Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 80

The face of the Other has no defense: it can provoke and at the same time it can stop any violence. As J. Dudiak remarks in *The Intrigue of Ethics*[16], the 'no' that comes from the face is not the quantitative, ontological 'no', of you cannot, you lack power, but the qualitative, ethical 'no' of "thou shalt not." I can destroy the face that is facing me, but at the same time, there is something that hinders me in doing so. Firstly, the relation with the face is a relation with a gaze. I see the eyes of the Other and I am fixed by these eyes. There is something in this gaze that stops me from exercising any power over the Other. The gaze of the Other interrupts my mastery over things and seem to forbid my mastery over him by saying " Do not kill me." "The gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything and which one recognizes in giving this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face... To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give to the master, to the lord."[17]

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[16] Dudiak, *The Intrigue of Ethics*, p.66

To encounter a face as a face is to encounter a nakedness, a mortality and destitution. Presented through his face, the Other shows himself as the most naked, poor and vulnerable of all weaknesses. "The nakedness of the face is not what is presented to me because I disclose it, what would therefore be presented to me, to my powers, to my eyes, to my perception in a light exterior to it. The face has turned to me – and this is its very nudity. It is by itself and not by reference to a system." [18]

The question is if the face of the other could not be a threat. The face of the Other is not a threat. In the first section of *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas writes that the Other metaphysically desired is not the "Other" like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell or the landscape I contemplate. The Other who commands me in his transcendence is the widow, the Orphan. The sphere of the Other includes all those that we generally call: the disinherited of the life who are powerless. Thus, the Other cannot be threat for me, because the Other who addresses me is powerless and needs me. On the other hand, I am also a face that transcends this world. In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Lévinas says that thanks to God I am also an Other for the Other, that is, I am also a face which escapes any totalitarian act.

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[17] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.75

[18] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.75

The face of the Other presents itself to me in its nakedness and this nakedness is vulnerability and demand. When something is presented in its nakedness it appears as it is in itself, without any protection, without pretending and simulating. The nakedness of its being expresses the essence of its existence, what really defines it. "Prior to any particular expression and beneath any particular expression, that – already as a countenance gives to oneself- covers and protects, the face is nudity and destitution of expression as such, that is, extreme exposition, the defence-less itself....This is a face in its uprightness of the facing up to..., a latent birth of the shortest distance between two points."[19]

One can say that the Other is a threat in a figurative sense. The face of the Other is a threat to my own freedom; he always precedes me. In all my action the first concern should be for the Other. Once he appears I cannot anymore perform egoistic acts only for myself. In *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence,* Lévinas explains in what sense the approach of the Other disturbs the monism of the I and is a fission of the subject, of the self. The encounter with the Other means openness toward what exceeds the circle of my individuality and the disposition of welcoming something that is new and different. The fact that the Other is closer to the self than the ego designates the deepest experience and condition of moral responsibility. At the same time, it means that everyone becomes a self in so far as another solicits him/her. According to Lévinas the essence of our nature, what makes us human is the fact of being an ethical and responsible subject. What makes us human is the exceeding of the shell of our own subjectivity and the total openness towards the Other. That is, the empirical presence must always reflect and emphasize its symbolical and metaphysical significance. That's the reason why Lévinas gives us the face as it affects us ethically rather than as concept or object. The eyes reflect and open the ethical horizon by catching us in their gaze, losing ourselves in that gaze and finally responding to it. The relationship towards the face loses the avidity proper to the gaze that would like to assimilate it and reduce it to the Same; it turns into generosity and responsibility. The metaphysical meaning of the face is deeply ethical and designated by the ethical language of the eyes and the questioning glance.

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[19] Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 162

# CHAPTER 2

# FACE, GOD, INFINITY

In this chapter I will present and analyze the relationship between the idea of God, Infinity and the face within the framework of Lévinas' philosophy. The main thesis to be discussed and argued is that the direct apprehension of God and Infinity is possible only by welcoming the Other. Within the framework of Lévinas' philosophy, the notions of God and Infinity are not anymore purely theoretical and abstract concepts, as they were in much previous metaphysics, but they bear a fundamental relationship to our everyday life and practices by having a basic ethical significance.

The idea of God and the idea of Infinity cannot be explained except by reference to the concept of 'face'. For Lévinas, God is the Infinite, the 'Absolutely Other'. Lévinas prefers to talk about God as Infinity and the Absolutely Other in order to avoid the reduction of God to an image or a philosophical concept; it is a way of talking about God in non-representational, non-objectifying terms. The idea of Infinity is in itself a form of transcendence in and of the relation to the Other. The face of the Other transcends the distinction between form and content, because it reveals the idea of Infinity to the separated being. To have the idea of Infinity is to be aware of the Other's Infinity.

According to Lévinas, the face with all its meaningfulness is the beginning of intelligibility. The claim that the face is the beginning of intelligibility represents the central point for illuminating the relationship between the ethical and the religious in Lévinas' thought. I would add that the face is the beginning of any religious/ metaphysical discourse on alterity. It is for this reason too that in "Philosophy, Justice and Love," in *Is It Righteous To Be?,* Lévinas says that the face of the Other—the face that is more than its empirical presence and exceeds any idea I can form about it—is the very beginning of philosophy.[20]

## 2.1. Lévinas' Concept of God and Religion

In *Lévinas Between Ethics and Politics,* Bergo remarks that Lévinas speaks about religion in two senses. He calls the first sense, 'the sacred'. This first sense refers to the sacralization of the elemental as the construction of myths and the practice of rites. The notion of 'elemental' here refers to all natural elements of the universe that cannot be transformed in things simply at our disposal, such as the wind, earth, sea, sky, air. The navigator, for example, can make use of the sea, but cannot transform it into a 'thing'. In *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas says, "the medium has its own density. Things refer to possession, can be carried off, are furnishings; the medium from which they come to me lies escheat, a common fund or terrain, essentially non-possessable, 'nobody's': earth, sea, light, city. Every relation or possession is situated within the non-possessable, which envelops or contains without being able to be contained or enveloped. We call it the elemental."[21]

Understood as sacralization of the elemental, religion sanctifies the natural elements of the universe and celebrates them through different rituals, myths and legends. Hence the concept of religion is interpreted as the mythic constructions of subjects confronting their own fragility before of the immensity and the infinity of the natural elements, the elemental.

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[20] "Philosophy, Justice and Love" in *Is It Righteous To Be?* Interviews with Emmanuel Lévinas, edited by Jill Robbins, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 165

[21] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity,* p.131

The second sense of religion is called 'holy' or simply 'religion' being defined as the bond between humans in ethical responsibility. For Lévinas, only this second sense is authentic religion. The etymology itself of the word 'religion' underlines the originary significance of religion as bond. The word 'religion' comes from the two Latin words're' and '*ligare*'. '*Re*' is a prefix meaning 'return', and '*ligare*' means 'to bind'. According to its etymology, the word 'religion' means, 'return to bondage' or 'to bind together'. When Lévinas asserts that religion is the social bond between humans in ethical responsibility he intends to restore the originary, the etymological meaning of the word 'religion'.

In the ordinary use, the word 'religion' signifies, according to Webster's 1974 dictionary, the outward act or form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of a god or of gods having power over their destiny, to whom obedience, service, and honour are due; a system of faith and worship. In other words, religion is the conscious relation between man and God, the expression of that relation in human conduct. At the beginning of *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas proposes a definition of religion as the bond that is established between the Same and the Other without constituting a totality, that is, an interhuman relationship that always remains open for welcoming of what exceeds its own selfhood and subjectivity. According to Lévinas, in religion, the relationship subsists between the Other and the Same despite the impossibility of the totality. " The Same and the Other can not enter into a cognition that would encompass them, the relations that the separated being maintain with what transcends it are not produced on the ground of totality, do not crystallize into a system…

The conjuncture of the Same and the Other, in which even their verbal proximity is maintained, is the direct and full face welcome of the Other by me."[22]

The deep meaning of religion designates the 'sociality' with the Absolute Other, and the peace with the human Other. The bond with the Other is an invocation. By saying that the social bond between I and the Other is invocation, Lévinas already introduces a religious dimension to the intersubjective relationship. The word 'invocation' has a deep religious meaning. According to Webster Dictionary, the word 'invocation' means the act or form of calling for the assistance or presence of some superior being; earnest and solemn entreaty; prayer offered to a divine being. The word 'invocation' has also a juridical meaning, as call or summons, especially, a judicial call, demand or order. The English word 'invocation' comes from the Latin word 'invocatio': 'voco', means, 'to call' and 'in' means 'over' or 'upon'. In English, the meaning of the word 'invocation' keeps very close to its Latin etymological meaning: both '*invocatio*' and 'invocation' mean 'to call in or to call upon'. When Lévinas says that the bond with the Other is invocation he means that the Other addresses me, calls my freedom into question. The bond with the Other is invocation, namely invitation to be open for what exceeds my own subjectivity and to hear the voice of the Other's face who is calling in and upon me.

Lévinas avoids using the word 'God' or other sacred and religious terms when he is defining his conception of religion. He does not want to change the relation with the Infinite and with divinity into a relationship with an abstract being. The word 'religion' must indicate the relationship between 'persons', the relationship with the alterity in general.

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[22] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 80

According to Lévinas the essence of religion and of any religious relationship is deeply ethical and is based on respect, care and infinite responsibility for the Other. Within Lévinas' philosophy, the concept of religion has a deep practical meaning referring to our daily behaviour towards other people. Religious feelings and religious life can only arise through the presence and the welcoming of the Other. It is through the encounter with the human Other that the absolute Other can be reached. In other words, the relation with God begins in the relation with the human Other. In order to argue this main point of Lévinas's philosophy I will use again Fachenheim's argument against the subjectivist- reductionist view according to which the faith, the love for God, is just a state of the man who feels it. As I showed in Chapter 1, section 2.2, Fackenheim rejects the subjectivist-reductionist view by arguing that the self is primordially open to the Other selves. It is through the relation with the other selves that we become a self-conscious self. Fackenheim shows that faith is first of all a relational fact that articulates a real experience and encounter. If faith was not a relational fact, it would mean that it is entirely the product of own imagination and, therefore, only a subjective state. When Lévinas asserts that we can welcome the divine Other by welcoming the human Other, he relies on the basic datum of our everyday life: the fact of living in community with Others. If we experience the absolute Other in isolation from the human Others, our experience would be only subjective and rejected on the ground of being a speculation, a product of our own imagination. It doesn't necessarily mean that this experience is untrue or unreal, but one can object that it is subjective, only a state of mind. Lévinas asserts that the encounter with the divine is possible by welcoming the human Other, because he wants to give an objective validity to his conception of religion and God. At the same time, Lévinas intends to restore the originary meaning of religion as 'binding together'. If religion is the social bond between humans, it means that it is a relational fact and not a subjective state of mind. As a relational fact, religion can be really lived only in community with the Others. That's the reason why Lévinas says that the divine Other is present and manifests within the intersubjective relationship. In order to encounter both the human Other and the divine Other, we have to open ourselves toward what is outside our own being. We could raise our own mind and heart to God in isolation from Others, but our religious experience would be only a subjective fact. If it was lived in isolation from the Others, religion would have only a theoretical dimension, for it would lack any opportunity to put in practice and to illustrate its essence that is deeply ethical. God reveals to Moses not to show and define its nature, but to tell him the Ten Commandments. Then God sends Moses to share with his people this experience and to tell them about His commandments. Moses' experience of the divine nature must be told and lived with his people; it cannot remain a secret, individual experience. For Lévinas, the basic meaning of religion is that of the social bond with the Other, care and responsibility for the Other because there must be no difference between theory and practice. We can say that we are a religious person, that we have respect and pray every day, but it will be worthless if we do not put in practice the religious principles within our everyday life. The proof of our religious beliefs should be given and illustrated by our behavior and action within our daily intersubjective relationships and not in isolation from the Others. To be concerned for the Other prior to ourselves means to be totally open for welcoming what exceeds our own subjectivity, that is to encounter the Absolute Other.

There is a sense in which Lévinas transfers the religious language to the ethical sphere. His main purpose is to locate the proper meaning of God in the ethical bond. But, at the same time, he seems to be 'allergic' to the description of God as a distinct reality. For Lévinas God manifests and commands only through the Other for whom I must act. To go towards God means to go and to welcome the other person. There cannot be any knowledge of God separated from the relationship with the other people. The personal God is not approached outside all human presence.

In his essay "Lévinas' Theological Suspension of the Religious" included in *Ethics as First Philosophy,* M. Westphal notices that within Lévinasian philosophy, a 'you' is inserted between the I and the absolute He. Lévinas interposes the human Other into the middle of any situation in which I purport to find God, so that there cannot be a direct link between myself and the absolute. In Lévinas' opinion, I approach the Infinite insofar as I forget myself for the neighbor who looks at me. This is a main feature of Jewish philosophy in which a trinity is always present: I and You and the Third who is always in our midst. It reappears in the Christian idea that "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20). That is, the presence of God/Jesus does not reduce to the meeting of the two humans.

Referring to Lévinas, Westphal makes the following argument: "Lévinas makes clear that this interlocutor is the human Other. But he also identifies this interlocutor with God. Therefore, he collapses the difference between the divine and the human and thereby reduces religion to ethics. The apparent threesome is an actual twosome."[23] But,

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[23] M. Westphal, "Lévinas' theological suspension of the religious" included in *Ethics as First Philosophy,* p. 152

Lévinas does not collapse the difference between the human and the divine and the Absolute Other does not identify with the human Other. The human Other is my neighbor and illustrates the real nature of the absolute Other; he is infinite separated from me and I cannot reduce him to my own representations and knowledge. The human Other is here and now. By respecting and answering at his call, in fact, I answer to the call of the absolute Other. In order to hear this call I have to be totally open for what overcomes my own subjectivity and to welcome what is outside my own being. Both my neighbor and divinity are defined as Other because they cannot be encompassed by the sphere of my individuality; they are distinct and other than me.

Yet there is still a certain ambiguity within Lévinas' philosophy between the human Other and the absolute Other. Lévinas chooses many times to speak about our neighbor as the absolute Other in order to show that there is no real delimitation and separation between the absolute He and You; yet, the absolute He and You are not identical. For example, in the first section of *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas asserts that the absolutely Other is the Other. Then, he continues, "He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say "you" or "we" is not a plural of the "I." I, you—these are not individuals of a common concept. Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger (*L'Etranger*) who disturbs the being at home with oneself. But Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no power. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal."[24] The ambiguity between the absolute Other and the human Other is obvious in this passage.

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[24] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity,* p.39

The passage opens with the affirmation that the absolutely Other is the Other and then Lévinas explains this assertion by talking about the Other as the Stranger; the Stranger stands for the human Other. The human Other as the Stranger for the human Other is very distinct -from me, he comes in front of me and obliges me "to host" him, to take care and to be infinitely responsible towards him. Also, the human Other is the Stranger because he is totally free and I cannot exercise any power over him. Lévinas switches from the absolute Other to the human Other, the Stranger in order to emphasize that we cannot reach and know God but through welcoming the human Other.

The apparent ambiguity between the absolute Other and the human Other has the role in showing and underlining that the human Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth and is indispensable for my relation with God. Despite Westphal's claim, Lévinas does not reduce God to the relation to the human Other. The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face he is the manifestation of the height in which God reveals himself. "The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed." [25]

Religious sentiment arises only with the Other and, therefore, religion is the ground of sociality. If religion is the ground of sociality then "the face" of the Other opens the realm of religious living and thinking. The Other's face does not play the role of mediator; he is not an incarnation of God, but precisely through his face he is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed. The relationship towards the Other represents the scene, the only horizon within which God is revealed. A fundamental question arises: How and to what extent does God reveal himself through the Other's face? In “Enigma and Phenomenon,” Lévinas proposes a comprehensive reading of two scriptural passages about theophany. The first biblical passage concerns the call of Moses in Exodus 3:2. Moses is tending his flock when he comes to the mountain of Horeb and the Lord’s angel appeared to him as flame of fire from the midst of a bush. The fire represents a symbol of God’s presence. When Moses sees the burning bush he says: “I have to turn aside that I may see this marvelous sight, why the bush does not burn up.” The burning bush can be interpreted as fire of the faith that burns the soul and calls it to the real life of religious living; it is a fire that never consumes or destroys, but that gives continuously birth to a new meaning to life. But, Moses is not allowed to turn his face and see God. God calls Moses from the midst of the bush saying: “Moses, Moses.” Moses answers: “Here I am.” God says: “Do not come any closer, take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy land. Then He said ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God.”

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[25] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity,* p.79

Lévinas selects this scriptural passage because it is very important for expressing his ideas about God, religion and the Other. When Moses is called by God, he answers: “Here I am” words which are for Lévinas the paradigm of the moral responsibility towards the Other. On the other hand, Moses does not have the courage to lift up his eyes, that is a sign of his humility and obedience for the divine command. There is also another passage in the Old Testament that tells of a similar episode. When Moses wants to look at God and see his glory, God says: “You cannot see my face, for no mortal man can see my face and live.” The desire to see God’s face represents a personal and individual desire for approaching the divinity. It also shows the individual’s curiosity and desire to know God. But God cannot stand within an epistemic relationship in which the human being is the active side, trying to catch the divine essence and God is just passive, letting Himself to be known. If that were so, it would result in an anthropomorphic representation and configuration of the divinity. Like the Other, God cannot be known but only approached in a dialogical relationship. To answer to this dialogical relationship means to put in practice and to respect the ethical commandments. God cannot be known in his essence but through his attributes and works, that is, through his ethical commandments. In an anthropomorphic image, a passage of the Old Testament asserts that Moses sees not God's face but his back. This episode reflects the limits of human knowledge; God cannot be seen with a totalizing view, but only partially, from the back. If one cannot grasp God in a totalizing view at least one can approach and live beside Him through living beside and for the Other.

The affirmation that the encounter with the other human coincides with my relation to God remains a constant of Lévinas' philosophy. For Lévinas the God of the Old Testament is not primarily the God of metaphysics but the Other Transcendent who can be known only by being infinitely responsible toward the Other. As Dudiak remarks in *The Intrigue of Ethics,* the transcendent God is not elsewhere, but with us, not as presence, but in and through the command by which I am commanded to the Other. "Transcendence requires my responsibility for the other testifying to the glory of the Infinite—to glory, *tout court*."[26]

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[26] Dudiak, *The Intrigue of Ethics*., p.342

Lévinas gives priority to ethics, for any proper understanding of transcendence comes from morality. That is to say, the only way to approach and meet the absolute Other, the divinity, is by way of the interrelationships with human others. There is a way to God, but it is not the way of the classical line of reasoning, presenting proofs of God's existence, but the ethical way. "Lévinas does not deny God, to be sure, but he does deny that the issue regarding God is one of affirmation or denial, belief or disbelief. It is the presence and not the existence of God that concerns Lévinas. And for Lévinas, as one might guess by now, God Himself appears in the ethics and justice of the relation of one person to another, in the one for the other."[27]

For Lévinas God is neither an absolute power nor the object of mysterious or dogmatic belief. The arguments for the existence of God do not have any relevance for Lévinas' understanding of the religion and divinity. Religion does not focus on the matter of faith, but on the intersubjectivity; it is insatiable desire for the absolute Other. God cannot be encountered but in the alterity of the other person. God comes to idea and mind in the non-indifference of one to another. As Lévinas himself says the height of God is measured in the depth of obligation. The appearance of God is not the unique appearance of a set of absolute rules or a privileged text. It is rather the very excellence of ethics, the command beyond commandments, and the love for the other prior to the love for oneself. But, religion is not only about the Other, the neighbor who is close to me, who before me "now and here." It is about all others, all the neighbors and people from this world. Religion does not limit to the ethical, to the infinite responsibility for the Other, but also concerns justice, that deals with the mundane world of actions, projects and representations. Ethics happens in my everyday contact with the Other that confronts me and claims my response. But, what about those who do not face me 'here and now' but who *could* all equally face me? How does ethics make justice possible?

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[27] R.A. Cohen, *Elevations The Height of Good in Rosenzweig and Lévinas,* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 130

The Other towards whom I am infinitely responsible reminds me of every other Other. In the face of the Other is signified always and already the face of all other Others—the 'third' in Lévinas' terminology. The third is always present in my relationship with God, for religion itself underlines the necessity to be concerned not only with the Other, but also with all Others, with all humankind. My ethical relation to the Other is an unequal, asymmetrical relation to a height that cannot be comprehended, but which, at the same time, opens onto a relation to the third and to humanity as a whole. The simultaneous presence of the Other and *all* other Others gives birth to the question of justice. Justice has its force in proximity of the face of the Other. "In the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me, and already this obsession cries out for justice, demands measure and knowing, is consciousness."[28] The Other stands for all Others, for religious discourse must concern all humankind and have a universal validity.

In *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* Lévinas underlines the necessity for philosophical discourse to be able to embrace God, the God of the Bible. "Philosophical discourse must therefore be able to embrace God – of whom the Bible speaks—if, that is, this God has a meaning. But once thought, this God is immediately situated within the

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[28] Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence,* Trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981, p. 158

"gesture of being". He is situated therein as a being (*étant*) par excellence. If the intellection of the biblical God – theology – does not reach the level of philosophical thought, it is not because theology thinks God as a being without making clear to begin with the "being (*être*) of this being," but because in thematizing God, theology has brought him into the course of being, while the God of the Bible signifies in an unlikely manner the beyond of being, transcendence."[29]

The religious discourse of the Bible presents the feelings and the acts of people who relate to God. Theology, according to Lévinas, does not reach the level of philosophical thought for in thematizing God, theology brings God into the course of being. Generally theology is concerned with proving and making arguments for the existence of God, with defining and explaining His nature. Thus God becomes an abstract concept.

Lévinas wants to transform philosophical discourse in order to speak faithfully of the God of the Bible, God as a commanding presence. His understanding of God and the religious is different from that which prevailed in most philosophy. The god of philosophers is an abstract, depersonalized God, a god whose attributes of omnipotence, omnipresence and beneficence serve as the product of ratiocination and sacrifices to the same. On the other hand, there is "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob" (as Pascal famously wrote on a sheet of paper after two ecstatic hours and which he carried about with him until his death sewn in the lining of his doublet), intervening at will in history, establishing relations with select individuals, the ultimate support of human ethics and justice. As I emphasized at the beginning of this section, Lévinas establishes the originary meaning of religion as being "bound back or together" and re-defines religion as the ethical bond between the Same and the Other without constituting a totality. Thus, the concepts of religion and God are essentially related to the notions alterity, ethics and justice. Lévinas' God is the God of Bible, whom Pascal too invokes: a God who is a living presence in our lives and who is the justification of ethics and justice.

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[29] Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind,* p. 56

Generally, religion denotes the influences and motives to human duty which are found in the character and will of God, while morality describes the duties to man, to which true religion always influences. Lévinas' thesis is that there is no distinction between religion and morality, they are one and the same thing. Generally, Western philosophy sees God as original support of the existing universe, as ground of all grounds and self-sufficient being. The God of Western philosophy does not need other beings but rather made them exist by bringing them into being, into existence. But, Lévinas' God is not the God of Western philosophy. Western philosophy can thematize God, make arguments for proving His existence, but the essence of religion, and God are directly revealed within the intersubjective relationships. According to Lévinas, our language about God should be in agreement with the relationship between I and the Other, which is the only place where God is revealed. God is not ground, foundation, substance, but the "He" who lives in the face of the Other. God cannot be included and encompassed through thetic and dogmatic discourse. He left a trace in the Other to whom I am infinitely responsible. On the other hand, as Lévinas maintains in *Totality and Infinity,* both religion and metaphysics describe a relation of a being with what it cannot absorb.

"In the concrete the positive of the face of the formal structure, having the idea of infinity, is discourse, specified as ethical relation. For the relation between the being here below and the transcendent being that results is no community of concept or totality—a relation without relation—we reserve the term religion."[30] By giving a moral meaning and significance to the idea of Infinity, Lévinas makes possible the embracement of the Biblical God by the philosophical discourse.

In the eight chapter of his book dedicated to Lévinas and Rosenzweig, R.A. Cohen analyzes Lévinas' attempt to think God and philosophy together, without reducing God to philosophy or philosophy to God. According to Cohen, Lévinas' work is an attempt to weigh and to respect the proper value of both terms and to bring them into a resolution which both may recognize as genuine. In *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas asserts that "Atheism conditions a veritable relationship with a true God *kath·auto* (self-caused)."[31] This statement includes a paradoxical and surprising affirmation: atheism is conceived as the condition of religion as the true 'bond' or relationship with God. Cohen explains this paradoxical affirmation by indicating the underlying reason behind it. Man is created in the image of God and must have free will, namely the capacity to refuse or to accept to enter into relationship with God. In Cohen's opinion, Lévinas means that "in order to enter into that special relationship which is the relationship with G-d, the human being must be sufficiently separated from G-d not to be obliterated, annihilated, extinguished, or erased by that relationship." [32] On one hand, there must be difference so that one can enter the relation (or fail to), and on the other hand, there must be difference in the relation so that the human is not obliterated or simply absolved into the divine.

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[30] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity,* p. 80

[31] Lévinas, Totality *and Infinity*, p.77

[32] R.A.Cohen, *Elevations The Height of Good in Lévinas and Rosenzweig*, p. 180

Atheism is the condition for a true relationship with God, because in the relationship between God and man neither of the terms can be reduced to the other. The atheist is free to deny any moment the existence of God and by making arguments for his atheistic position he confesses, in fact, the existence of God. One cannot oppose to something that does not exist. As Cohen notes: "Atheism is the possibility of a being capable of putting up a determined, resolute or willful resistance to G-d. Only an able being is a being able to refuse G-d. And, only a being able to refuse G-d is a being able to be moved by G-d." [33]

According to Lévinas, "the dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face."[34] This statement underlines the significance of the face as that through which the divine opens forth. Opening the dimension of the divine, the face cannot be understood in cognitive or aesthetic terms, but first of all as having a deep moral meaning. The face becomes the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed. According to Cohen, "Lévinas always links the moral dimension, the height of the other person, to religion, in a broad nondenominational sense. Indeed, it is precisely the ethical face-to-face relationship that Lévinas calls 'religion'… Lévinas takes the asymmetrical moral implosion effected in the interhuman relationship to be " the dimension of the divine," " the height in which God is revealed." It is not, Lévinas would have us think, that religion is reduced to intersubjectivity… but rather that intersubjectivity is raised to religion… By this I mean to say that for Lévinas G-d imposes Himself on humankind, commands humans, by way of and exclusively by way of interhuman relationships." [35]

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[33] R.A.Cohen, *Elevations The Height of Good in Lévinas and Rosenzweig*, p. 182

[34] Lévinas, Totality *and Infinity*, p. 78

The face as dimension of the height in which God is revealed opens forth the domain of ethics and justice and makes the I infinitely responsible towards the Other and, at the same time, for all Others. The closed circle of the selfhood is broken up and the I is no longer for itself, but first of all for all Others.

Lévinas' discourse on God and divinity takes a fundamental turn towards the ethical domain and justice. Atheism seems to become a fundamental condition of a true relationship with God. Man is born with free will, he can reject or accept God's existence, but he can see further than the totalizing sphere of his selfhood. Even if he can reject God and take an atheist position, he cannot deny and reject the epiphany of the face that signals the presence of the Other. The face of the Other becomes his transcendence and betrays the autonomy and the freedom of the selfhood. The Other is a constant and vivid presence into the universe; he stays in front of the self who cannot deny his presence here and now. The Other is the dimension of the height, of a moral force that puts in question my freedom and annihilates the natural self-orientated being. The height has a fundamental moral dimension; addressing the Other in an ethical way I address God who, according to Lévinas, rises to His supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men.

We can see that the whole analysis of Lévinas' conception of God leads inevitably to ethics and justice. God is invisible, unthematizable, but He expresses himself in the face of the Other. No relationship can rejoin God, because He is not a term, but the Infinite.

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[35] R.A.Cohen, *Elevations The Height of Good in Lévinas and Rosenzweig*, p.187

### 2.2. The idea of Infinity

> How must we understand the adjective infinite? Is this, originally, a noun or an adverb? In other words, "is" the infinite "something," or is it only a "how" notably the "how" of alterity: infinitely other?…I think that the Infinite is the domain where the distinctions disappear. I think that if the infinite was an infinite, under which there would be substance, an *Etwas überhaupt* (something in general) which would justify the substantive term, it would not at all be the absolutely other, it would be an other "same"…I think that God has no meaning outside the search for God.[36]

In the above quoted paragraph Lévinas emphasizes the complexity of the problematic surrounding the idea of Infinity. The idea of Infinity seems to have an ambiguous status. It cannot be included in any grammatical category. Although the words 'infinity', 'infinite' and 'infinitely' can function grammatically as noun, adjective and adverb, these grammatical categories not only do not express the meaning Lévinas has in mind, but also distort it by 'substantializing' it.

According to its etymological meaning, the notion of Infinity is defined as that which has no bounds. The word "infinity" comes from the Latin "infinitus," meaning *unlimited*, and usually is denoted by the symbol ; it is the quality of being unbounded or unlimited. The characteristic of being unbounded and unlimited can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand, it can designate the Infinite as a quantitative term, as what doesn't have an end. On the other hand, it can be taken as defining the Infinite as a qualitative term having the sense of the perfect and unconditioned. This latter sense of the Infinite is mostly present within philosophical and theological discussions. As I will show, for Lévinas the Infinite does not designate an unending quantity but what cannot be bounded by a conceived essence.

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[36] Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 94-95

If Infinity is unbounded and unlimited, how can it be defined? Lévinas will answer that there is no proper definition of Infinity for Infinity makes all distinctions and delimitations disappear. Infinity can be experienced only through the face of the Other for, as I showed in the previous section, by welcoming the human Other we welcome the divine Other. If Infinity can be experienced through the face of the Other it means that Infinity is strongly related to the experience of alterity. The idea of the Infinite is the social relationship. The main purpose of this section is to show how Infinity is the idea of God in us and how the Infinite is essentially not a theoretical, but a moral idea that opens the realm of ethics for the intersubjective relationships.

Lévinas confesses, many times, to the revelation regarding the idea of Infinity that he had while reading Descartes' Meditations; he calls a memorable fact, a great source of wonder Descartes' idea of a thought thinking more than it thought. Since Lévinas' account of the Infinite is influenced by Descartes' concept of the Infinite, I will start my discussion of the Lévinasian notion of the Infinite by presenting the main points of Descartes' Third Meditation. In the synopsis preceding the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes explains that the Third Meditation provides a proof of the existence of God. Descartes' main argument is that the idea of God as infinite and perfect Being could not occur in the finite mind of a human being unless God really existed. My self-certain thought of my own existence in the *finite* act of thinking presupposes the idea of the Infinite. The idea of God as infinite and perfect being is an innate idea in the human mind, an idea which cannot be created by any finite being but which is necessary for such a being to understand itself as finite. God can only create this perfect idea. Thus, Descartes does not draw any distinction between the idea of Infinity and God. God and Infinity are one and the same.

According to Descartes, all the ideas that I have—such as ideas that represent animals or people similar to me—can be produced by me or can be contained in me immanently. But, the sole idea of God cannot come from me. As Descartes writes, I reflect on myself, I know that I am imperfect and incomplete thing, that I can be deceived so that I cannot be the author of this perfect idea of the Infinite. The idea of the Infinite must itself be caused by something perfect. That is, the finite human being can contain the idea of the Infinite only because God put it into the human mind; the finite thought of man cannot draw from itself the idea of the Infinite, of God.

The Third Cartesian Meditation is, for Lévinas, memorable because it reveals the capacity of the finite thought to think more that it thinks. There is an apparent contradiction here: how can a finite being think and surpass its own capacities and content? How can the idea of Infinity be accommodated within finite thought? Lévinas answers: "Regardless of the outcome of the 'proof of the existence of God' that Descartes claims to deduce from this putting of the idea of the infinite into us, the coming or the descent or the contraction of the infinite into the finite thought names an event that describes the meaning of what is designated by divine existence, rather than the mediate datum of an object adequate or equal to the intention of knowing, rather than the presence of a being in the world, a being affirming itself, that is to say, placing itself firmly on the 'unshakable' surface of the earth, beneath the vault of a starry sky."[37]

The possibility of the finite mind to think more than it thinks and to contain the idea of Infinity must be understood and taken as an 'e-vent' (i.e., something that comes to the subject) and that as such happens to the finite mind. It is not simply what the finite mind 'does' as the outcome of its understanding and knowledge, an act that would reduce the event to the adequate fulfillment of the finite mind's intention. If it were that, Infinity would be reduced to the Same and would be identified with the presence of a being in the world. But the reduction of the Infinite to the Same would deny the Infinite as what cannot be bounded and comprehended. Lévinas shows that the idea of the Infinite is an exceptional relationship that cannot be described in terms of container and contained. "The relation with infinity cannot, to be sure, be stated in terms of experience, for infinity overflows that thought that thinks it. Its very 'infinition' is produced precisely in this overflowing. The relation with infinity will be stated in terms other than those of objective experience; but if experience precisely means a relation with the absolutely other, that is, with what always overflows the thought, the relation with infinity accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word."[38] The relation between the infinite and the finite cannot be transformed in any sort of fusion or union. The finite being has the idea of the Infinite because it is affected by the Infinite. To be affected by the Infinite is not the object of a reduction; it underlines the possibility of the finite to open towards what exceeds its own being.

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[37] Lévinas, "The idea of the Infinite in us" in *Entre nous Thinking-of-the-Other,* Trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p.220

[38] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 25

In the Preface to *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas underlines that Infinity does not first exist and then reveals itself. Infinity is already placed in us, a basic datum of our existence. In the Third Meditation, Descartes argues why the idea of the Infinite is placed in us. The idea of the Infinite must be placed in us by something exterior and transcendent to us, because we are finite beings and, therefore, we could never have the idea of an infinite substance. Hence, its existence is designated by our capacity of thinking more than we think. It is a way of exceeding our own subjectivity and becoming aware of our finitude. Our awareness of our own finitude is the negation that derives from our being affected by the infinite Other. We can conceive of our own finitude only in terms of our idea of the Infinite. That is to say, the Infinite is not the negation of the finite, but the non-indifference of the Infinite with regard to the finite. The Infinite is the non-indifference with regard to the finite, because the Infinite is not separated or totally opposed to the finite. If the Infinite was separated from the finite, it would mean that this separation and opposition would limit the Infinite. But the Infinite surpasses any limits and cannot be bounded. Therefore, there must be a strong relationship between the Infinite and the finite. The in- from the Infinite is not a non- or a not- of any kind. It is not negation of the finite. The in- from the Infinite shows that the Infinite is in- finite, namely it is placed in and affects the finite being. By being affected by the Infinite, the human being can exceed its own subjectivity, open and welcome what is exterior to itself. The exterior that reveals over-there to the finite being is the Other. Thus, the issue of the Infinite is that of an Other which cannot be bounded by a conceived essence.

Lévinas' account of the Infinite seems open to potential objections, since he does build it starting from Descartes' idea of Infinity. It is Descartes' claim that this idea is the clearest and most distinct idea we have, which would seem like an object rather than an Other. Descartes' main interest is an epistemological one; he wants to show, on one hand, that the soul is immortal, and that God exists, and, on the other hand, that these findings can be proved by reason. Lévinas is not concerned about this epistemological line of reasoning. He does not intend to prove the existence of God. In his view, any epistemological approach reflects the tendency of the human subject to reduce the Other to the Same. Lévinas' and Descartes' aims are, therefore, totally different. Descartes wants to establish the foundations of a stable science while Lévinas is concerned with ethics, with the moral dimension of the intersubjective relationships. For Descartes, the idea of Infinity is theoretical and proves the existence of God while, for Lévinas, the idea of Infinity is moral, underlying the capacity of the human subject to exceed the circle of his own subjectivity and to welcome what is outside himself.

Descartes' idea of God as infinite, immutable, all-knowing is the idea of God of traditional metaphysics. But Lévinas' purpose is not to save this tradition. As Perperzak writes: "Lévinas admires in this text the affirmation of the irreducible originality of this idea, an affirmation that remains true when it is stripped of its elaboration by the 'natural theology' of the scholastic tradition. The irreducibility is expressed by Descartes' pointing out that the idea of God must necessarily have been 'placed in me' by something exterior and transcendent to me."[39] It is Descartes' idea of Infinity as what overflows the thought that thinks it that Lévinas calls a 'memorable fact' and helps him in introducing and explaining his original account of Infinity. Lévinas carries forward Descartes' line of thought by emphasizing that the Other as what is always already present shatters the supposed totality of being and thus occasions a necessarily ethical relationship.

To understand Lévinas' thesis, it will be helpful to consider this relationship to further. Descartes' realization that the idea of the Infinite could not be created by a finite mind and that it must, therefore, have been put into this mind by the Infinite itself indicates, for Lévinas, a breach of totality, a rupture of the world that signals the presence of the Other. In *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* he writes: "After the certitude of the cogito present to itself in the second Meditation, after the 'halt' that the last lines of this Meditation signal, the third Meditation announces that 'I have, in some manner, in me firstly the notion of the Infinite rather than the finite, that is of God rather than myself.' The idea of the Infinite, the Infinite in me, can only be a passivity of consciousness."[40] According to Descartes, the idea of the Infinite does not originate in my own cogito, but is put into me. All the ideas that I could find in the cogito (ideas of things, animals, other men) could have originated in the idea I have about myself. But, there is one exception: the idea of God. The ideas of things, animals need not presuppose the existence of the things outside my own cogito since these ideas could have been formed from the idea I have of myself. But the idea of God is totally different, because it is a substance that is infinite, independent, supremely independent, supremely powerful. Lévinas does not accept the substantialist language employed by Descartes. What Lévinas adopts from Descartes is only the experience of a subject who finds in itself more than it can account for by itself from itself alone, an awareness that the idea of Infinity was put in him. While for Descartes this discovery comes only after a deliberate process of meditation, for Lévinas we have the analogous awareness simply in ordinary experience. The awareness of the Infinite in our being is something that is taken for granted and doesn't need any argument or justification. This fact makes it more vulnerable to criticism and objections. How can we be aware of the idea of the Infinite in the first place? Lévinas would argue that by welcoming the Other we welcome the absolutely Other, the Infinite. The encounter with the Other is a basic datum of our experience and doesn't need any argumentation. The Other is other than us and his essence cannot be bounded. By welcoming the Other we acknowledge the existence of something that exceeds our powers. Hence, by welcoming the Other we become aware of the idea of Infinity. The idea of Infinity is placed in us. The putting of an idea into the subject implies the passivity of an affected subject. Hence the idea of Infinity can be only a passivity of the consciousness, born and produced with us from when we were created. It means that the perception of the Infinite is somehow prior to our perception of ourselves. Found there where a subject is not first related to itself but to what is other than it, the idea of Infinity reflects the openness of the human being towards what comes from the idea of Infinity. As Lévinas often underlines the idea of Infinity is essentially moral, bearer of ethical values. That is, the passivity of the consciousness places the human being under the obligation to accept and to put in practice what comes from the idea of Infinity: moral values and ethical principles.

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[39] Peperzak, *To the Other,* p.57

[40] Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* p. 64

The idea of the Infinite does not enter into conflict with the finite being or is not the negation of the finite. As Lévinas remarks in *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* "the difference between the Infinite and the finite is a non-indifference of the Infinite with regard to the finite, and is secret of subjectivity. The figure of the Infinite-placed-in-me, which if we believe Descartes is contemporary with my creation, would signify that the not-able-to-comprehend-the-Infinite-in –thought is, in some way, a positive relation with this thought." [41] The in- from the Infinite is not the sign of privation with regard to the finite. On the contrary, it designates the capacity of the finite to overcome its limits and contain more than it actually does. Infinity awakens the passive consciousness and makes it to overcome the closed shell of its own subjectivity and to open towards what is different: the in-finite. The finite being is not overwhelmed or overpowered but the Infinity disowned and directed to the Other. There is no real distance and separation between the Infinite and the finite; the Infinite is already non-indifference with respect to the finite. The infinity of the Infinite, his differing from the finite is his non-indifference regarding the finite.

> The Infinite affects thought by simultaneously devastating it and calling it; through a "putting it in its place," the Infinite puts thought in place. It wakes thought up. This is a waking up that is not reception or welcome of the Infinite, a waking up that is neither recollection (*recueillement*) nor assuming, both of which

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[41] Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 65

> are necessary and sufficient for experience. The idea of the Infinite puts them in question. The idea of the Infinite is not even assumed, like the love that is awakened by the tip of the striking arrow, but in which the subject, stunned by the trauma, immediately finds himself again in the immanence of his state of soul. The Infinite signifies precisely the hither side of its manifestation, to the representation of presence, or to teleology."[42]

The idea of Infinity awakens the passive consciousness by calling it into question. The passive consciousness becomes aware of the Other's presence outside itself, that this Other does not have his origin in the passive consciousness that, therefore, cannot reduce the Other to it. Such consciousness cannot make the Other a moment of its own being; it can only welcome and answer to the call of the Other. Hence this awakening engages actively subjectivity in the play of alterity and ethics. It is ethics that describes the horizon within which the meaning of the Infinite acquires significance.

Still, in being described as what exceeds the thought that cannot contain it, the idea of Infinity does seem to have a negative sense, namely, as what cannot be described positively. But, Lévinas argues that the subject has a positive relation to the Infinite. The affective relation with the Infinite is Desire, an endless Desire that cannot be filled.

> Affected by the Infinite, Desire cannot go to an end to which it might be equal; in Desire, the approach creates distance and enjoyment is only the increase of hunger... In order that disinterestedness be possible in the Desire for the Infinite – in order that the Desire beyond being, or transcendence, might not be an

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[42] Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 66

absorption into immanence, which would thus make its return-the Desirable, or God, must remain separated in the Desire; as desirable – near yet different-Holy. This can only be if the Desirable commands me (*m'ordonne*) to what is the nondesirable, to the undesirable par excellence: to another. The referring to another is awakening, awakening to proximity, which is responsibility for the neighbor to the point of substitution for him."[43]

The idea of Infinity is Desire that cannot be filled, since being affected by Infinity means to be affected by what does not fit into an intentional structure to the point of not letting itself be adequately represented, thematized or named. God must remain separated in the Desire. The Desire for God does not mean possessing God, but always wanting more. The deeper the Desire for the Infinite grows, the more this idea is thought, seeing that this thought always contains more than thought can think.

As I stressed at the beginning of this section, the idea of the Infinite is a thought that at every moment thinks more than it com-prehends. This account of Infinity reflects Descartes' vision on of the Infinite. Lévinas thinks that Descartes' vision of the Infinite is among the most remarkable expressions of the transcendence. The idea of Infinity testifies to the soul's capacity to contain more than it can withdraw extract from itself through self-reflection. Lévinas calls the thought that thinks more than it thinks, Desire. Desire is always directed toward something different that does not belong yet to the subject that initiates it; it measures the infinity of the Infinite. It is not a movement of assimilation or negation, but respect for the Other as Other. Desire is called to by the absolutely irreducible exteriority of the Other to which it must yet remain infinitely inadequate. It is Desire that cannot be fulfilled and thus finalized. If it could be fulfilled, another Desire would take its place and the order of priorities would be changed. By always remaining inadequate, Desire places the human subject under a continuous search and effort to honor the Other.

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[43] Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p.68

Desire for the Infinite is expressed in terms of goodness and responsibility for the Other. As Lévinas stresses in *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* God remains separate in Desire only if the Desirable orders me to what is non-desirable. Since I am ordered to the non-desirable by virtue of my desire, I cannot rejoice in the end at which my desire would aim. Instead, my desire turns me from its end and directs me to what is most foreign to it—the non-desirable, '*autrui*' precisely as inviolably 'other'. My desire for the Infinite directs me towards the non-desirable, "*autrui*," for the idea of the Infinite signifies a subjectivity ordered to responsibility for the Other. '*Autrui*' is non-desirable for he calls my freedom into question and always escapes my powers; my own being can never assimilate him.

The Infinite is not a concept, but the radical, absolute Other. I discover the idea of the Infinite in my own being and I want to know it, to see how it is possible to think more than thought can contain. I discover that I can come closer to the Infinite only through welcoming the Other, through forgetting myself for the neighbor who looks at me. My only way of expressing the Infinite is by existing and living for-the-Other. When I live for Other the 'I' does not stand anymore for nominative, but for accusative. Lévinas calls this accusative 'marvelous accusative' as saying 'here I am' under your gaze, obliged to you and your servant in the name of the God. It is interesting to note the other signification of the word accusative, as what is accused and thus infinitely obliged. Staying in 'accusative' means replacing the emphasis from 'I' to the Other. 'Here I am' in the name of the God and thus for the Other. As I underlined in the previous section, God cannot be approached except in an ethical way. "Ethics is not a moment of being, it is otherwise and better than being, the very possibility of the beyond... His absolute remoteness, his transcendence turns into my responsibility for the Other." [44] It also means that the idea of Infinity occurs in the relationship with the Other, in the social relationship. The social relationship, the existence of the Other is the only possible revelation of the Infinity and God.

In *Lévinas Between Ethics and Politics,* Bergo notes that there is a polysemy of the word 'Infinite'.

> When responsibility is so characterized, infinite qua adjective implies that which is not limited by an action and that which is recognized in the inexhaustibility of obligation, in the course of the repetition of the welcome and service to the other. When the term "infinite" is nominalized and holds the place of the (human) other, it implies an absolute distance which is not limitable by spatial as other 'physical qualities' or constraints: it implies, infinitely beyond the I and its knowledge, even outside of consciousness. As such, however, it is still not to be confounded with the Infinite of which we speak when employing that most enigmatic of expressions, God. [45]

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[44] Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p.69

[45] B. Bergo, *Lévinas Between Ethics and Politics,* Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999, p. 229

The many significances of the word "infinite" show its various implications and presence in almost all our actions. It can designate the realm of ethics by describing our moral responsibility for the Other as having no limits; it can also signify the impossibility of assimilating the Other to the Same. It can also designate divinity as transcendence, as what exists beyond the finite. Within Lévinas' philosophy, the idea of the Infinite refers both to the human Other and the absent Other. There must be a human Other in order for God to speak in our experiences and life.

The analysis of the idea of Infinity shows that Infinity signifies only in relationship with the finite. The Infinite transcends itself in the finite and orders the neighbor to me without exposing itself to me; it signifies only through the Other. As Dudiak writes, "the Infinite is not finite first to later enter into relation with the Same, but infinite by virtue of the relation with the same; its 'infinity' is produced in, is a function of, this relation. Lévinas puts this to us again later, perhaps more explicitly- and already in the specific context of the ethical relation."[46]

The expression, "Here I am in the name of God" bears witness to the Infinite. To bear witness to the Infinite, God, is not to state, "I believe in God," but "Here I am in the name of God," and thus at His service that I may serve and help the people who look at me. Again as Dudiak writes, "too high to push itself to the first place, the Infinite defers its place to the other, calls not first of all for its own glorification, but is glorified in the responsibility that I have for the Other."[47]

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[46] Dudiak, *The Intrigue of Ethics, p. 78*
[47] Dudiak, *The Intrigue of Ethics*, p. 338

The idea of Infinity is glorified only by the signification of the one-for-the-other. The structure of experience has revealed itself to be a relationship with the Other, with the idea of Infinity. The relationship with the Infinity concretizes itself in the relationship with the Other; it arises in the encounter with the Other and is not knowledge of the Infinite, as taking into possession and reduction of the Infinite to the Same. The intersubjective relationship between me and the human Other designates the relationship with the Infinite, with something that although stays before me, at my disposal, it transgresses my powers and annihilates the freedom of my actions. God's revelation is possible only through the Other's face. It is the interaction with the human Other that gives rise to the idea of the Infinite and God.

To sum up, the idea of the Infinite is produced in the form of the social relationship with the Other, with his face. As the idea of the Infinite, the face is present in its refusal to be contained. In *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas says that the face cannot truly be either seen or touched at the level of sense, "for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object which becomes precisely content."[48] The face cannot be comprehended and encompassed, and in this way is aligned with the ideas of Infinity, God and ethics.

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[48] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity, p.* 194

# CHAPTER 3

# FACE, ETHICS AND JUSTICE.

From the previous chapters we can see how the presentation and the explanation of the key ideas of Lévinas' philosophy—such as religion, God, Infinity—are intimately connected to the discussion of the concepts of 'face' and 'ethics'. Without these concepts we cannot properly explain the meaning of divinity and alterity within the framework of Lévinas' philosophy. The purpose of this third chapter is to focus upon the significance of the face as bearer of ethical and religious values. In the first section of this chapter I will discuss the ethical significance of the face and will focus upon the main arguments for the pre-eminence of the face within the ethical discourse of alterity. In the second section I will discuss and analyze the relevance of the concept of responsibility for defining the experience of alterity. In the third section, I will focus upon the relationship between ethics and justice; I will show how ethics makes possible the extension of the discourse about the Other to all Others, how the ethical discourse of the infinite responsibility leads to justice, to the mundane world of actions and representations.

## 3.1. The ethical challenge of the face

As I emphasized in the first chapter of my thesis the revelation of the metaphysical meaning of the face is through its empirical presence. Without the background of the physical appearance and presentation of the face, all discussion about the metaphysical significance of the face would have a 'ghostly' character. If the face did not bear a fundamental relationship to the empirical phenomenon, all discourse about the metaphysical meaning and the ethical challenge of the face would be only theoretical without any practical relevance for the human subject. Yet when we talk about the ethical challenge of the face we refer to the fact that the face breaks through its plastic image. The face breaks through its plastic image when its eyes challenge, disturb and make me responsible for the Other. Since the ethical challenge comes from the eyes of the Other, from the empirical face, its reality and significance cannot be denied. It is something real, something that happens before me; I cannot avoid and reject it as unreal.

In order to emphasize the relationship between the empirical face and its ethical meaning, I will present and compare Lévinas' and Rosenzweig's conceptions of the face. I chose Rosenzweig's philosophy, for Lévinas confesses many times his admiration and indebtedness to Rosenzweig. In the preface to *Totality and Infinity,* for example, Lévinas acknowledges that the influence of *The Star of Redemption* is so present in the book as to go beyond citation.

The overall aim of Rosenzweig's philosophy is to know and to acknowledge the experience of the reality of the irreducible elements: God, World, Humanity. According to Rosenzweig, these three realities - God, the world, and the individual - interact. God relates to the world by creating it. The world is not independent of God. It is God who transcends both the individual and the world and at the same time connects them. By creating a triangle of God, People, and the World, Rosenzweig encapsulates his philosophy into the symbol of David's Star.

The specific theme of the face is not as prominent in Rosenzweig's work, but it is also not totally absent. The face plays a special role in revealing the essence of the three elements of the triangle God, People and the World. The face is human, of the world, but, at the same time, it is a reminder of God. The individual lives in the world, with other persons and, at the same time, he lives before the Divine countenance. His face, the disposition of his facial features are very similar to the religious symbol of David's star. Both the disposition of facial features and the shape of the Star of David are an example of the hexagram. The shape of the Star of David is a hexagram, a six-pointed star formed by two overlapping equilateral triangles. The Star of David is the symbol of Judaism. Within some cultures the triangle pointing downwards represents female sexuality and the triangle pointing upwards represents male sexuality. The combination represents unity and harmony. Jewish scholars such as Franz Rosenzweig have attributed deep theological significance to this symbol. According to these religious interpretations, the top triangle strives upward, toward God while the lower triangle strives downward, toward the real world; the intertwining makes the triangles inseparable.

For Rosenzweig, the hexagram image of the Jewish star is composed of two conceptual triads, which together form the basis of Jewish belief: Creation, Revelation, and Redemption on one triad; God, Israel, and World in the other. The two triads are reflected in the disposition of human facial features. Rosenzweig sees the face as mirroring our understanding of the interaction of God, man, and world, which gives an orientation to everyday life. The human face has a worldy, empirical appearance, but, at the same time, it signifies more than an empirical manifestation: it is the locus where the human and the divine interact.

In *The Star of Redemption,* Rosenzweig describes the human face graphically in terms of the forehead, eyes, ears, nose, cheeks and mouth. To this extent, we have only an anatomic description of the face. But what individualizes it is the placement and coordination of these facial elements on the symbolic grid of the two overlapping triangles of the David's star. The disposition of the anatomic facial features appears at the climax of the Star. "Just as the Star mirrors its elements and the combination of the elements into one route in its two superimposed triangles, so too the organs of the countenance divide into two levels."[49]

The forehead, as the dominant point of the entire face and the cheeks form the first triangle of the Star of David. This first triangle contains nose and ears that are organs of pure receptivity. That is, the upper triangle designates the possibility of the human being to be affected and to be receptive to the divine manifestation. Over this first triangle, it is imposed a second triangle composed from eyes and mouth. It is eyes and mouth that give expression and life to the face by expressing what happens inside the human being. The eyes speak through their silent language about the feelings and the moods of the human subject, while the mouth expresses verbally what the human subject thinks and wants. By their spoken/unspoken language both eyes and mouth animate the face and individualize it through expressing thoughts, feelings and moods of the human subject. Although from the anatomical point of view forehead dominates the physical structure of the face, it is eyes and mouth which, from a metaphysical point of view, express the symbolical meaning of the face. The expression of the eyes and the words of the mouth show that the human face is alive and can express what happens in the human mind, soul and heart. Rosenzweig notices: "just as the structure of the face is dominated by the forehead, so its life, all that surrounds the eyes and shines forth from the eyes, is gathered in the mouth. The mouth is consummator and fulfiller of all expression of which the countenance is capable, both in speech as, at last, in the silence behind which the speech retreats: in the kiss. It is in the eyes that the eternal countenance shines for man; it is the mouth by whose words man lives. But for our teacher Moses, who in his lifetime was privileged only to see the land of his desire, not to enter it, God sealed this completed life with a kiss of his mouth. Thus does God seal and so too does man."[50]

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[49] F. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption,* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985, p. 423

Rosenzweig's description of the face is more graphic and symbolic than Lévinas' concept of face. Rosenzweig's account of the face details concrete features: eyes, ears, cheeks, mouth and attributes to them a symbolic meaning by showing that they are distributed according to the geometry of the Star of David. This similarity between the disposition of facial features and the Star of David is open to criticism. The fact that Rosenzweig pays particular attention to the anatomic features of the face and finds a similarity with the Star of David does not serve to stress the ethical and the religious significance of the face. One can argue that Rosenzweig pays special attention to the physical features of the face, because the divine discloses itself in the configuration of the lines that make up the human face. But the special focus on the anatomic details can lead to an anthropomorphic representation of divinity. His description obliges the reader to represent the face from a pure physical point of view and makes more difficult the representation of the facial features as a bridge and opening towards the divinity.

Lévinas' philosophy of the face does not insist so much on the physical details of the face. It is true that this fact leaves his description of the face more open to criticism, but it underlines that the empirical face is not just an anatomical part of the human body among others, but that it has a special meaning and signification that cannot be understood by limiting it to the physical details. The face is bearer of ethical values that should guide the intersubjective relationships. Though *Totality and Infinity* is dominated by the concept of the face, we do not encounter any focused physical description of the face. For Lévinas, the eyes, their glance, constitute the most important feature of the face, but with his philosophy, Lévinas is more concerned to meditate on the metaphysical meaning of the face. Lévinas talks about the ethical face of the other person, of my neighbor, whereas Rosenzweig discusses the face in general, without individualizing it as being mine or the Other's. Lévinas's focus on the face of the Other makes his ethical message stronger and more obvious. It is true that Lévinas' conception of the face *seems* less rooted in the everyday experience of faces that we all have. But, despite Rosenzweig's description of the face, Lévinas' concept of the face, by being less rooted in the everyday empirical aspect of experience, shows that the face should not be seen just as a thing among others, as a simple part of the human body, but as having a deep metaphysical significance. He thus reminds us that the meaning of the everyday experience of the face transcends what is empirically present yet without him falling into a 'ghostly' account of the face outside experience.

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[50] Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, p. 423

For Lévinas, the eyes of the Other, his glance, concentrates the essence of any ethical discourse. As I emphasized in the first chapter, his concept of face has both a deep metaphysical meaning and bears a fundamental relationship to the empirical appearance of the face. The metaphysical meaning of the face is revealed in the first place in and though the empirical appearance of the face. Lévinas puts a special emphasis on the metaphysical meaning of the face in order to avoid any reduction of the face to its empirical appearance and to see the manifestation of a metaphysical significance in its empirical presence. The empirical face spreads itself forth as a set of physical qualities forming an image. But, at the same time, the face of the Other destroys and overflows its own plastic image; it is a 'disturbance' that calls into question our conceptual command of the world.

Yet both for Lévinas and Rosenzweig, the face appears as primary and primordial opening between the human and the divine. But, Lévinas' analysis of the face seems to focus more on the ethical language of the eyes, on the metaphysical meaning of the face. One can object that Lévinas' account of the face is no longer rooted in the actual experience of faces in the world. It would mean that, in the past, the face had a symbolic, metaphysical meaning and, now, this significance got lost, does not exist anymore. But, the metaphysical meaning of the face is not something that is added to the empirical face. As I underlined in the first chapter, empirical faces are not first given to us in sense experience and then a metaphysical meaning is subsequently attached, but a metaphysical meaning is already presupposed in the appearance of the empirical face as a face in the first place. It is true that, many times, when Lévinas talks about the face, he seems to ignore the empirical meaning of the face in the favor of its ethical significance. It does not mean that he excludes or rejects the physical appearance of the face, but that he focuses on the metaphysical meaning. We can explain this fact by Lévinas' preoccupation with the ethical meaning of the face, the infinite responsibility that I have for the Other. Lévinas wants us to see in the Other, first of all, a permanent 'calling into question' of one's own existence and thus the beginning of any ethics.

For Rosenzweig, the concept of the face designates both my face and the face of the Other. Ethics comes from God. According to Rosenzweig, to do justice and to love mercy one must come 'to walk humbly with thy God'. To be good, humankind must imitate or resemble God. According to Rosenzweig, the only reason man is capable of love is because God loves. One of the Ten Commandments is to love our neighbor as ourselves because God loves man. The face brings God's law down to earth through embodying the divine commandments. All human actions, speech, thought, expression are in the image of God. As Cohen remarks "Rosenzweig's orientation is quite close to that of Lévinas, but it is all-important nuance away. For Lévinas, 'to do justice and to love mercy' is also 'to walk humbly with thy God', for walking humbly with G-d arises in the doing of justice and the loving of mercy. G-d is where there is justice and mercy. Or, to express this in a formula dear to Lévinas and close to Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin, and close also to the transcending intention which burst through the conclusion of the Star, to be face-to-face with the alterity of the other person, to be for-the-other-before-oneself, is to be for G-d, à Dieu."[51]

We can observe a subtle distinction between the way in which Lévinas and Rosenzweig conceive and talk about ethics. For Rosenzweig, first of all I have to walk humbly with God, to be a religious person and then I can become a moral person who does justice and loves mercy. For Lévinas, there is no order of priorities: to do justice, to love mercy also mean to walk humbly with God. I can do justice and love mercy without necessary being a religious person. There is a sense in which Lévinas avoids using directly the words God, religion, religious. He does not want to limit and to address only to religious people. Doing justice and loving mercy already mean to be close to God and to respect and put in practice His commandments. For Lévinas, the ethical discourse does not need any preliminary setting or discussion on the theme of the religion and religious, but it just manifests itself and doing so it also manifests God.

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[51] R. A. Cohen, *Elevations The Height of Good in* Lévinas *and Rosenzweig*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 273

For Lévinas, to love God and to be a religious person mean not only to confess our faith to other people, but first of all, to respect and to put in practice the words of God, His commandments, from which the most important one is to love your neighbor like yourself. In *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* Lévinas writes: "I cannot describe the relation to God without speaking of my concern for the other. When I speak to a Christian I always quote Mathew 25: the relation to God is presented there as a relation to another person. It is not a metaphor; in the Other, there is a real presence of God. In my relation to the Other I hear the word of God. It is not a metaphor. It is not only extremely important; it is literally true. I am not saying that the Other is God, but that in his or her face I hear the word of God."[52]

For Lévinas the word of God is heard and inscribed in the face of the Other, in the encounter with the Other. At the same time, he denies the idea that the face is a mediator between God and us. The face is the way in which the word of God reverberates; it is the ethical challenge addressed directly by the Other to the Same.

The way in which Lévinas presents and explains his concept of face gives it a dual status. On the one hand, it has an'ontic' quality (to borrow Heidegger's terminology) which includes its empirical properties and the objective meaning of the face as face; and on the other side, an ethical significance, which transcends empirical facts and ontic meanings. The phenomenality of the face reveals an ethical moment. In this regard, Derrida states that the face is neither the face of God nor the figure of man, but their resemblance. This remark is amazing and at the same time controversial. If the face is not the figure of man, then what is the face? What Derrida wants to say when he asserts that "the face is neither the face of God nor the figure of man, but their resemblance" is to issue a warning not to stop at the empirical appearance of the face but to see it as the bearer of ethical and religious significance. "The encounter with the face," he writes, "is not only an anthropological fact. It is, absolutely speaking, a relation with what is.…But it is the analogy between the face and God's visage that, in the most classical fashion, distinguishes man from animal.…The Other resembles God." [53]

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[52] Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* p. 171

According to the biblical expression, man was created in the image and likeness of God; it is this resemblance with God that distinguished man radically from animals. We can say that the expression "man is created in the image of God" can symbolize the fact that only man is endowed with the capacity of deliberating and making his own choices; that is, of all the living beings, only man can think and have free will. With his intellect and his will, man is capable of forming a relationship of communion, solidarity and self-giving with his peers. In Lévinas' view, the face can be said to have been created in the image and likeness of God because it appears as though it were God's face, namely enigmatically, paradoxically, disturbingly, infinitely obligating and making the subject responsible. "Lévinas simultaneously proposed to us a humanism and a metaphysics. It is a question of attaining, via the royal road of ethics, the supreme existent, the truly existent as other. And this existent is man, determined as face in his essence of man on the basis of his resemblance to God."[54]

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[53] Derrida. "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, p. 142

The human being is expressed through the face on the basis of its 'resemblance' to God. This resemblance sustains the aspiration of the human being towards what transcends his own existence, towards the supreme existent, the absolutely Other. The humanism proposed by Lévinas is a philosophy of the face, a face that is more than an empirical appearance. It is only through the welcoming of the Other's face, through the ethical behavior toward it that the Same can attain the truly existent as the Other.

The controversial affirmation that the face is not God's face or human face, but their resemblance finds an interesting explanation and significance within Cohen's book about the height of good in Lévinas and Rosenzweig. "Just as man neither is not G-d, but is created in the image and likeness of G-d, and just as man neither is nor is not the Creator of the universe, but acts as though he had divine creative power, the face of the other person neither is nor is not G-d's face- - for G-d has no real face, no spatial or conceptual face. Still- a rejoinder that can only be effaced by will power, by the will to power – the face of the other person nonetheless, enigmatically, paradoxically, disturbingly "appears" as though it were G-d's face. It obligates infinitely, making the subject responsible, Lévinas will say, or the very responsibility of the other person, even beyond the death of the subject, whether that death be my own mortality or the death of the other to whom I am bound." [55]

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[54] Derrida. "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, p. 142

[55] R. A. Cohen, *The Height of Good in Lévinas and Rosenzweig*, p. 273

The face of the Other does not represent an imitation and copy of God's face. Lévinas ' expression that the face of the Other manifests God does not have to be interpreted literally, for God has no face in that empirical objective sense. It must be understood as manifesting God's words and commandments, the commandment of loving the neighbor and being infinitely responsible for him. We always see a determinate face, a countenance, but Lévinas says that "this is not the way I think about the face. One can first of all consider the face, *le visage*, as it were something seen, although I would then say in French, it is defaced, '*dévisagé*'. Defacement occurs also as a way of looking, a way of knowing for example what color your eyes are....Face, as I have always described it, is nakedness, helplessness."[56] The face is a physical manifestation, but what is the most important from its empirical appearing is the ethical message that it addresses.

The question arises as to why it is the face and not another part of the human body that addresses the ethical challenge, why this pre-eminence of the face within the religious and ethical discourse of alterity? In order to justify and explain the central role played by the face within the religious and ethical discourse about alterity, I will present Cohen's main arguments for the pre-eminence of the face and, then, I will discuss and develop his keys points.

In *Elevations The Height Of God in Lévinas and Rosenzweig,* Cohen notices that the most obvious reason for the preeminence of the face, for its quasi-divine nature is its natural verticality, "the above and below" that it orients in conjunction with the natural verticality of the standing human body. "The human body and the human face are both upright, or should be. Physical and ethical significations parallel and shade into one another: in facing another person one's attention is orientated toward and by the uppermost part of other's body; in like manner one is orientated upward to G-d. The face looks out from atop the body' God looks out from above the creation." [57]

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[56] Lévinas, *Is it righteous to be?,* p. 41

When I meet somebody, firstly I address and look at his face. No other part of his body is more important but his face, the expression of his eyes. It is not because I ignore and I do not care about the other parts of his body, but because a real dialogue is addressed to the face. This instinctive orientation towards the face of the Other, towards the highest part of the body suggests my attitude towards the Other, the welcoming of his face as the primordial bridge between the human and the divine. On the other hand, when we pray we direct our look and prayer towards the sky, towards what is the uppermost part of the universe. This similitude shows, once again, that the face, as the uppermost part of the human body, designates our aspiration towards the absolutely Other. When Christians make the sign of the cross, they make the first sign right on the face, on the forehead. The cross is traced from forehead to breast and from shoulder to shoulder. The sign of cross starts with the face because the face is the uppermost part of the human body and symbolizes God, the Father who lives in the uppermost part of the universe, in the skies. As the most above part of the human body, the face is closer to the celestial world and becomes a point of mediation between the terrestrial dimension of the life and the human aspiration towards what is above him, towards the divine.

In addition to its location as the uppermost part of the human body, the face is also the locus of more kinds of openings than any other place on the surface of the human body. "The body is nowhere more open. All senses are at play there: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. Here too one thinks, wrinkles one's brow. Of all human faculties, activities, and desires, perhaps only feelings, full body gymnastics and athletics, and certain urgent dimensions of eros, are more powerfully focused elsewhere than the face.…No other comparably compact area of the body or world is open to a greater range of give and take. The face is by nature intense, a zone of intensities and exchanges."[58]

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[57] Cohen, *Elevations The Height Of God in Lévinas and Rosenzweig*, p. 242

The face plays a middle role between the human and the divine because of its physical features, of being the locus of most openings of the human body. The empirical face is the locus of the most important senses: touching, seeing, smelling, tasting, and hearing. All human life gains significance and meaning through these senses. The most vivid and direct interaction between the world and the self takes place through these senses located at the level of the physical face. In his description of the face, Rosenzweig notices that the nose and ears are organs of pure receptivity, that is, they represent the place through which the human being gets information from the exterior world. They designate the capacity of the human body to be open towards what overcomes his selfhood and to be ready to receive and welcome what is different. Smelling and hearing are ways through which I can experience the exterior world as it presents itself.

On the other hand, the mouth and the eyes become an active dimension of my own experience of the world; they designate my own response and attitude towards what is exterior to my self. If nose and ears are organs of pure receptivity, the mouth and the eyes represent the active part of my own experience of the world. It seems that for

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[58] Cohen, *Elevations The Height Of God in Lévinas and Rosenzweig*, p. 243

Rosenzweig mouth has more symbolical meanings than the eyes. According to him, the mouth is consummator and fulfiller of all expression of which the countenance is capable, both in speech and, at last, in the silence behind which the speech retreats: in the kiss. Though he writes that it is in the eyes that the eternal countenance shines for man, he still privileges the mouth for it is the mouth by whose words man lives. In that sense, Rosenzweig mentions the biblical episode of Moses who could not enter but only see the holy land, the land of his desire. And God sealed this completed life with a kiss of his mouth. From this biblical episode we can notice the great importance of the eyes and mouth. Even if Moses could not enter the holy land, he can get knowledge about it and experience it in another way: just through seeing and getting a kiss. Thus, Moses' life was completed by God. The symbolical meaning of this biblical episode is that even though we cannot always experience the divinity in a direct way, we can still become aware and feel its presence through our inner senses.

The role of the mouth and the eyes in experiencing divinity leads us to the third reason for situating the juncture of man and God in the image of the face. Cohen writes: "a third reason lies in the very life of the face. That the face is alive means, of course, that it is active, fluid, moving and moved, physically and emotionally, that it is expressive.... Living beings grow their life travels one way from birth to death, passing through infancy, youth, maturity, and old age, never returning the same or to the same like reflection.....At the same time, without contradiction, the face crystallizes a whole life; it gives evidence of accumulated and accumulating vulnerabilities and powers, of experiences etched as character in lines and wrinkles on its skin."[59]

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[59] Cohen, *Elevations The Height Of God in Lévinas and Rosenzweig*, p. 244

The face is the locus of the intensity of life and significant expression. It is in the face that all our feelings, expressions, and thoughts become obvious and are communicated to the world and to the others. If we want to know more about a person, we just look at her face and notice her expression. There is an old saying that the eyes are the windows of the soul and they always reveal a person. We can try to mask our life, to pretend through our behavior that everything is good or not, but our eyes, the expression of our face, always betray us and tell the truth about what we think, live and experience. A smile or a tear can say more than our words and gestures. The face has its own life and cannot lie. If the eyes smile and are serene then that person is feeling good and happy. The face expresses all our emotions and feelings as they are and cannot pretend. It appears to be the most sincere and pure part of our being. At the same time, it is the most exposed to the passing of time. As Cohen says, the face crystallizes a whole life and gives evidence of all our weaknesses, strengths, good/bad experiences. The passing of time leaves its trace on our faces and betrays what and how we lived. There is a saying that asserts that it is an art to know how to get old in a beautiful way, that is an art to keep our face and eyes beautiful, serene, clear. The years leave wrinkles on the skin, but cannot affect expression of the eyes and the saying of the mouth.

Cohen's arguments for the preeminence of the face within traditional thinking reveal the face as bearer of ethical and religious values. The discussion of three arguments for the preeminence of the face underlines the strong connection and relationship between the empirical face and its ethical meaning.

The face is the concrete emergence of the Other. In it, the being of the face presents itself. The Other looks at me and speaks to me. Through his looking and speaking he causes a discontinuity of the encompassing world and the context that is common to us. The face of the Other is not an object "at hand", something can I assimilate and manipulate the way I want. It looks at me, its eyes express its vulnerability. The face of the Other speaks, addresses me; it is not just present, but also a commanding presence. Without the face, the Other would be a thing among many others, for it is the face that individualizes him. A usual method of torture for war prisoners, present unfortunately even nowadays is to cover the heads of prisoners and then to humiliate them. The fact itself of covering and thus hiding their face is a humiliation, for it denies their own individuality, their identification as human persons. The torturer needs to cover the face of the prisoners in order to reduce them at a simple object, not to see the suffering in their eyes and the imploration for mercy. He wants to avoid the questioning glance of the prisoner's face who is seeking for a meaningful response. That is, the physical face is not a simple object, is not only a physical presence, but, at the same time, an ethical message breaks through its plastic form.

As I showed in the first chapter, there is a kind of ambiguity concerning the concept of face, an ambiguity between its empirical presence and metaphysical significance. This ambiguity of the meaning of the face underlines its dual function, its dialectic of revealing/concealing, hiding and showing the Infinite.

The Infinite solicits through a face. The idea of Infinity has a fundamental ethical meaning being produced in sociality, in the active relationship with the Other. As I underlined in the section "The idea of Infinity," Infinity does not present itself as a transcendent thought, but in the Other. The infinity lies in the Other's face; it paralyses by its infinite resistance to the murder. As Lévinas writes in *Totality and Infinity,* the idea of infinity in consciousness is an overflowing of a consciousness whose incarnation offers new powers to a soul, power of welcome, of gift, of full hands and hospitality. The epiphany of the face reveals the Infinity, the Other, his total resistance to any reduction to the Same, to any grasp. "Infinity presents itself as a face in the ethical resistance that paralyses my powers and from the depths of defenseless eyes raises firm and absolute in its nudity and destitution." [60]

The face of the Other is the trace of the Infinite, of an imperative height. In *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas writes that the Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face he is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed. The dimension of the divine is not the Other's face, its surface, skin, but rather the height that opens through his surface, skin. When Lévinas asserts that the Other is the face of God he does not mean that the divine is a being. For Lévinas, the divine is not a being, but rather a dimension; the dimension of the divine is the height. The central affirmation of Lévinas 's philosophy is that the face of the Other manifests in a moral height which is the dimension of God, the revelation of God.

In "Jewish Dimension of Radical ethics" from *Ethics as first philosophy,* R. Gibbs notices that Lévinas uses the phrase *The Most High,* a name of God from Hebrew Scriptures, El Alyon, as the name for this superlative height of the infinite of Desire. The face of the Other is not the incarnation of God, but it manifests the Most High. "Lévinas insists that in our relations with other people we find the only meaning that theological concepts can bear. Height, as found in the magisterial authority of the other, before whom I stand, is where God is revealed. And that height is bound to the other metaphysical term: the infinite. For Lévinas, the infinite is not a negative judgment, but a perfection. Height stands as the dimension of perfection, largely because of the asymmetry and the general sense of the escape of the other from my horizon. Thus the idea of the infinite designates a height and nobility, transcendence." [61]

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[60] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity,* p.200

Lévinas prefers to use the notions of Infinity, the Most High instead of God; he does not want to situate the discourse about the Other's face and God at a transcendent level and thus to grant it a special status. On the contrary, Lévinas'main purpose is to situate the discourse about the Other and God within the boundaries of our everyday life and experiences. The concepts of Infinity and the Most High are substitutes for the concept of God. In his study about the relationship between the Jewish thought and Lévinas'philosophy, R. Gibbs notices that the term of "The Most High" has limited use in the Bible. "The term for God that Lévinas prefers the Most High (El Alyon) has limited use there (in the Bible). It occurs often in the Psalms, but otherwise appears in what historians would identify as the earliest strata of the texts, for example, when the Canaanite priest Melchizedec makes peace with Abraham, Melchizedec uses this term to refer to God. Bilam, another Canaanite, uses it to praise God. And David and Moses use it in some of the most obscure and antique texts in the Bible. When we advance to the era of sages, the term "The Most High" refers solely to buildings and generally represents the structure of height.... The term is seldom used and almost never refers to God. In the mystical texts of the Middle Ages, it usually refers to the highest sphere of heaven or the upper world, but not to God." [62]

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[61] R. Gibbs, "Jewish Dimension of Radical Ethics " in *Ethics a sFirst philosophy*, p. 16

[62] Gibbs, "Jewish Dimension of Radical Ethics " in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, p. 20

Though the term "The Most High" is not so often used in The Old Testament and when it is it rarely refers to God, Lévinas uses it with a strong religious and ethical meaning. The Other is The absolute Other, the Most High because he is the trace of God within our world. God leaves traces on our earthly world through his words, through his moral commandments. Within Lévinas' philosophy and the Jewish tradition, we cannot talk about the spatiality of God. The only way in which we can interpret the spatiality of God is to insist on the ethical commandments. The ethical commandments teach me that the other person is higher than I. Since the Other is higher than me, there is no reciprocal or symmetrical relationship between I and the Other. We do not constitute each other in a moment of encounter. The Other is already higher than me and questions me, my freedom. "Paradoxically, height is not socially constructed by power; rather, Lévinas insists, that height is encountered as the other person's poverty, destitution, and, most important, humility. This paradox of height… only shows further what sort of height Lévinas is describing: neither the stars and the heavens nor the high and mighty, but the one who, in standing up, rises above me, my own sense of being in this place, of being at home… Height signals this resistance without power, a command that can compel only pacifically… And the other speaks from this height, constituted merely by the moral authority of another person, a person who facing me, questions and criticizes me." [63]

The idea of the Most High is strongly connected to the concept of face. The empirical face is the top part of the body, the raising of the body. This raising up of the body, this standing up can be interpreted as the material referent of height. What transcends my 'here' is another person's body and not the stars or the sky. The dimension of the divine is not the face itself, its surface and skin, but rather the height that opens up through the skin. The dimension of the divine, as Lévinas says, opens forth from the human face and therefore the face is height, the height in which God is revealed.

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[63] Gibbs, "Jewish Dimension of Radical Ethics " in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, p. 15

On the other hand, Gibbs remarks that there are some problems with the notion of height. It can point to something presupposing a cosmic sense of reference to heavens. In Gibbs' opinion, the concept of height seems to fail to evoke the ethical transcendence and that's the reason why Lévinas changes the emphases from height (in *Totality and Infinity)* to nearness, proximity (in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence).* The significance of Infinity is translated into the ethics of approaching. "The infinite gains ethical import by making the distance between us immeasurable, by marking between me and the other person a gap that I experience as drawing me near without ever getting me to the other person as orienting me toward the other, for whom I become responsible."[64]

The shift of accent from height to proximity has the role to transpose and to turn the ethical discourse into an essential mark of our everyday life. Though the notion of height does not seem to fail to evoke the ethical transcendence. It is a mistake to interpret the concept of height as a spatial relation, in terms of here/there, down/up. The notion of height presupposes a moral dimension, the dimension of moral height and goodness. But, another more concrete concept is needed in order to make obvious and to impose the ethical discourse in the domain of the alterity. The height becomes more concrete and suggestive through being completed by nearness. When I look at the Other's face I can begin to recognize the transcendence and the Most height in the uprightness of his body.

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[64] Gibbs, "Jewish Dimension of Radical Ethics " in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, p. 17

The face of the Other manifests and is manifest in a moral height that is the dimension of God. I can see this moral height shining forth in the face of the Other. The Other is " the Most High" and, at the same time, the nearest and the closest to whom I can address and who can address me. "Ethics needs Jewish thought in the sense that it requires a true infinite, a radically transcendent God who can make the dimension of height turn into hyperbole. Without that infinite, that non-ontological God, the relationships between me and the other person will always risk collapsing back into some sort of mediated identity, however richly dialectically constructed, and the demand of God beyond being will be impossible. Only where such height intersects nearness in space rendered ethics is a saying possible, my saying as I enter the words '*Me voici*'."[65]

"*Me voici*" is already an answer to the ethical challenge addressed by the Other. I am here in order to protect and to be infinitely responsible for the Other. In *Philosophy, Justice and Love,* Lévinas quotes Old Testament, Genesis 11:7, Exodus 19:18 and he says that there is no separation between the Father and the Word. It is in the face of the Other that the moral commandments come and interrupt my world. When God asks Cain "Where is your brother?" Cain answers: "Am I my brother's keeper?" In other words, why should I feel responsible for the Other? Lévinas comments that if the face of the Other is taken as an image among images, then the word of God cannot be recognized in the Other's face. What lacks from Cain's answer is ethics, morality. His answer consists solely of ontology: I am I, he is he; we are two different and separate beings. Cain's answer is exclusively ontological.

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[65] R. Gibbs, "Jewish Dimension of Radical Ethics " in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, p. 23

## 3.2. *Face and Responsibility*

Lévinas emphasizes many times that the face cannot be reduced to a play of physiognomy. It does not indicate a signified; it is not a sign of a hidden God who would impose the Other on me. Ethics responds to the face with the question, "Who," disclosing the alterity of the other person, rather than the question, "What" which reduces the alterity to an impersonal system of signs and structures. The "Who" of ethics addresses the other person in herself with no intention of assimilating or subordinating her to the Same. The meaning of the face and, generally, of the human is not measured by presence or appearance. It signifies by way of transcendence, by putting into question my freedom. I have the freedom to live for myself, as Cain does and to answer: "Am I my brother's keeper?" But this way of responding by another question shows the closed and totalizing circle of the selfhood, of someone who lives just for him/herself.

In the essay, "Lévinas and the Hebraic Tradition" in *Ethics as First Philosophy,* Catherine Chalier notes the apparent paradox of the meaning that the concept of freedom has within Lévinas' philosophy. She remarks that freedom usually means autonomy, but Lévinas does not think that freedom is autonomy. For Lévinas, moral freedom must be constantly orientated by the exteriority of the Other. Heteronomy becomes a main feature of Lévinas' concept of moral freedom. To be heteronomous means to be subject to different laws, to external or outside rules or laws. In Lévinas' words, to be heteronomous means to be subject to the Other, who always precedes me. Chalier insists that Lévinas' concept of heteronomy does not mean alienation or tyranny for two reasons: First, "it helps the self to be conscious of the other man and to be aware of the true meaning of the word 'human'. This heteronomy leads to the 'difficult freedom' of one who agrees to be a creature, a creature whose existence answers a calling that is prior to it, a calling that which is waiting for its answer…The uniqueness of the self — which is a prerequisite of freedom — does not rest in its self-asserting, but in its answering the calling that appoints it as unique."[66] Second, the notion of heteronomy as defined and defended by Lévinas is a loving one. According to Lévinas, the law is the badge of love. Judaic tradition is woven from commandments. The commandments are not a formalism but the living presence of love. "Heteronomy does not lead to slavery, but to goodness… The difficult freedom described by Lévinas is the freedom of a religious election."[67]

The question that imposes is what does freedom of a religious election mean? This expression seems to be contradictory: freedom generally means to act according to our own will, to have no restrictions and limits in our actions. Freedom is, also, autonomy, self-government or independence. As autonomy, freedom means rational *self-*determination of the will, giving the law—*nomos*—to oneself—*autos*, that is not to be subject to others. On the other hand, to be the subject of a religious election means to obey and to follow some rules that are exterior to us. Lévinas' conception of freedom as "freedom of a religious election" has the role to introduce a fundamental moral dimension to the concept of freedom. Morality does not start with freedom. It is aroused in man's consciousness when he becomes aware of the guilt of such a freedom. Lévinas calls this freedom "*difficile liberté*," that is a freedom that must justify itself. It can be objected that "*difficile liberté*" is an impossible freedom since it entails a responsibility that can never be humanly fulfilled. The designation of the responsibility for the Other as infinite underlines that this responsibility for the Other has no boundaries or limits in extent, time or space. By being infinite, responsibility does not have any end; it cannot be performed only once or a few times, but always, all times. It guides all our behavior and actions towards the Other. Whatever we do it is not enough so that we must always do more and more for the Other. Therefore, the moral freedom is an impossible freedom in the sense that we can never escape or ignore its imperative call, but not in the sense that it cannot be practiced.

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[66] Catherine Chalier, "Lévinas and the Hebraic tradition" in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, p. 7

[67] Catherine Chalier, "Lévinas and the Hebraic tradition" in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, p.7

The infinite responsibility for the Other defines us as moral free agents. To be free does not mean to be exempted from any guilt or responsibility. On the contrary it traces the lines of an infinite responsibility that the we have towards the Other. Morality begins only when freedom does not justify itself, but feels itself arbitrary and violent. "Morality does not take the root in a reasonable will or a reasonable freedom, but in my aptitude to welcome the neighbor in such a way that his life will be more important to me than my own life." [68]

The difficult freedom about which Lévinas is talking is the freedom of a moral agent, the freedom of putting him/herself in the service of the Other. It is not the freedom of the will's self-determination, but the freedom of responsibility, the ability to 'commit'. The root sense of the word responsibility is the Latin *spondeo,* I commit. Responsibility means (being able) to commit to the Other. Hence the freedom of responsibility becomes the subject of an exteriority, the exteriority of the neighbor and of

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[68] Catherine Chalier, "Lévinas and the Hebraic tradition" in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, p. 7

God. The exteriority of God and the neighbor turns the concept of freedom in a moral freedom of a religious election.

Lévinas chooses the words "difficult freedom," "infinite responsibility," "ethics" in general so as to describe the highest human destiny, the holiness meaning of a life wholly for the Other. Ethics is when I not only thematize the Other, but when the Other obsesses me and puts me in question. The I cannot be anymore concerned for him/herself, but first of all for the Other who summons the I through his/her face. In *Lévinas and the Philosophy of Religion,* Kosky maintains that Lévinas 'notion of responsibility includes four characteristics of the responsible subject:

a. uniqueness
b. passivity
c. belatedness
d. accusedness

The responsible self is unique or singular, for no one can take responsibility for me. I am responsible for everything and no one can substitute for me. In Kosky's words, the very uniqueness of the self in responsibility is at the same time its renunciation or the emptying of all self. The responsible self is passive; it does not constitute itself or identify itself in reflection upon its own consciousness but in its relatedness with the Other, in the recognition of its infinite responsibility for the Other. On the other hand, the responsible self discovers that his/her own actions carry the sign of a" difficult freedom," of an infinite moral responsibility for the Other who accuses all his/her acts. But, can I be truly responsible if I can never fulfill that responsibility completely? Is this infinite responsibility towards the Other an utopia? The origin of these objections consists in the word "infinite" that defines the concept of responsibility. As I mentioned at the end of the first section of the third chapter, Bergo says that the 'infinite' of the infinite responsibility must be understood as that which is not limited by an action and that which is recognized in the inexhaustibility of obligation, in the course of the repetition of the welcome and service to the Other. No action can exhaust it. Responsibility extends throughout all our life and is not limited by an action; it is infinite, endless. That is, I must always be responsible and at the service of the Other. This infinite responsibility can be performed, but never fulfilled. If it could be fulfilled and have an end, it would mean that it is something that the Same can assimilate and reduce to itself. The infinite responsibility towards the Other characterizes the moral freedom of the Same, but can never be reduced to its own being. If it could, it would be no more a way of experiencing God through the Other's face. By recognizing and being infinite responsible for the Other, the Same can experience God and religion through the ethical way of divinity's commandments. The Other's face signifies a divine order or command that summons me to respond to the Other. A command is heard in the face of the Other.

> Face demands me, assigns me. Should we not call that demand or that challenge or that assignment of responsibility the word of God? Does not God come to mind precisely in this assignment rather than in the thematization of something thinkable, even rather in any invitation to dialogue? Does not this summons to responsibility designate me, in the

> face of the Other as responsible without any possible escape and thus as the unique, the chosen one?[69]

The human face functions as symbol of an infinite responsibility. A symbol is a concrete object that makes present an invisible reality; it always evokes a feeling or is evoked by a feeling. This connection between affectivity and symbol gives to the symbol a special status. Whenever we use a symbol we are pointing to the idea behind the image of the symbol. The human face is a symbol because it evokes the divine ethical commandment of infinite responsibility for the Other. It operates as symbol and unites a feeling with an image. The face of the Other obliges and commands "Thou shalt not kill"; this command issues from the image of the Other's face. The Same is "affected" by the Other's face and must respond to its command. That is, the face is an empirical presence, an image, but it communicates more meaning than its image; it has a metaphysical significance pointing to the feeling of infinite responsibility for the Other. The face is the symbol that bears the feeling of responsibility. As a symbol the face does not' obey the laws of logics but the laws of image and feeling. It means that it can express what escapes to the logical discourse: internal tensions and conflicts, struggles.

Lévinas' concept of face is conceived as symbol and not as sign because, as Lévinas says in *The Trace of the Other*, a sign and its relationship to the signified are already thematized. Signs are events or things that are indicative of other events or things. Basically, anything that represents something else is a sign. According to Saussure, sign has a certain structure defined as the association between a signifier and a signified in a system of signs determined by their differentiation. We can take the letter F and say it represents the meaning "face." The signified is the meaning face, which the letter F signifies. The signifier is the letter F; it is phonetic and graphic. The sign requires the presence of both F and the signified. For Lévinas it is the 'sense' of the sign that allows us 'reference' to faces. Lévinas criticizes structuralism saying that it thinks exclusively in terms of the relation of signifier and signified within signs systems. His notion of face is not reducible to a sign for the face's epiphany is not the thematization of any relationship with a signifier. As a sign, the face would be reduced to the relationship between a signified and a signifier in a system of signs. The pre-eminence of its metaphysical significance and ethical challenge would thus be lost. When I assert something or point something out there is significative reference. Judged in this way face would be first an empirical presence and then, by our referring a metaphysical meaning would somehow be added. But, as I showed in the first chapter, a metaphysical significance is already included and presupposed in the empirical presence of the face. There is no separation between the signified and the signifier, because the face is speaking by itself. What the face primarily says, its *signifié* is nothing but its saying

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[69] Lévinas, "From the One to the Other" in *Entre-nous. Thinking of the Other*, p. 147

As a symbol, the physical image of the face is also feeling, a feeling of infinite responsibility for the Other. That is, a metaphysical significance is already presupposed in the physical appearance of the face. The feeling of infinite responsibility towards the Other is thought by Lévinas as a relation to the trace. He says that the revealed God of Judeo-Christian spirituality shows himself only by his trace. To go toward Him is to go toward the Others who stand in the trace. God's trace is not a sign, because sign is constituted in immanence. God cannot be a presence; He only 'affects' and we can experience Him through the feeling of infinite responsibility. The feeling of responsibility is conceived as a relation to the trace, because trace makes possible a relationship to the Other which does not reduce the Other to the Same, a relationship to the transcendence that is not convertible into immanence.

In "Tracing Responsibility" in *Ethics as First Philosophy,* Jill Robbins says that a trace is conceived as a residual phenomenon, as the mark of what previously was present. She notes that ordinary traces can be taken as signs and thus they can be accessible to someone who will decode them. When he talks about trace, Lévinas gives the example of the fingerprints left by a criminal, the tracks of an animal, the vestiges of ancient civilizations. All these are examples of trace-signs; they are empirical signs of an absence and remain within the phenomenal order, in the world. For example, the fingerprints of a criminal remain even if he wanted to wipe them away and thus to commit a perfect crime. He who left traces did not want and mean to say or to do anything by his traces.

Lévinas's trace is not a trace-sign, but the trace of the Other. This trace escapes phenomenal presence, for it cannot be understood even through its presence. In *Otherwise than Being,* Lévinas says that the trace in which a face is ordered is not reducible to a sign. "A sign and its relationship with the signified are synchronic in a theme. The approach is not the thematization of any relationship, but is this very relationship which resists thematization as anarchic. To thematize this relation is already to lose it, to leave the absolute passivity of the self. The passivity prior to the passivity—activity alternative, more passive than any inertia, is described by the ethical terms accusation, persecution, and responsibility for others."[70] The sign is intended to transmit a message, to say something; it needs to be decoded and thus thematized. But to thematize means to reduce the sign to the order of representation to the Same. Lévinas prefers to talk about the feeling of responsibility as a relation to the trace and not as a relation to a sign, because despite the sign, the trace just happens; though we do not want to recognize it, it is just there, before us. Even if we want "wipe it" away, we cannot make it disappear, we cannot annihilate the ethical language of accusation, persecution and responsibility for the Other. The Other stands before me, accuses me. I cannot ignore the feeling of responsibility that I have towards the Other; this feeling of responsibility inscribed on the Other's face is the way in which I recognize the trace of God.

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[70] Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence,* p.121

In "Tracing Responsibility," Robbins talks about two consequences of Lévinas's concept of responsibility as a relation to the trace. According to Robbins, the first consequence is that the Other to whom I am responsible cannot be said to be there. "The trace by which the face of the Other signifies is outside the presence-and-the-absence dyad, and thus cannot be conceived in terms of the metaphysics of presence (that is, another presence or as a subject)."[71] If the Other was described in terms of the metaphysics of presence he would be reduced to the Same. But I am responsible for the Other even if he is not facing me now and here; the feeling of responsibility for the Other is infinite, without boundaries in time and space. I must care about him even in his absence.

The second consequence of thinking responsibility as relation to a trace concerns the status of the interruption, the disturbance. The Other affects the Same who cannot close anymore in the shell of its subjectivity and calls the Same to infinite responsibility for the Other. For Lévinas, the call to responsibility, to serve our fellows is divinity in the face of the Other, the trace of the God. It is the divine imperative that precedes our choice to serve. The divine call to serve the Other manifests as moral call. God is alive in our lives insofar as we respond responsibly to the command manifested in the face of the Other. The God who calls us in the face of the Other is the God who asks us to respond and say "*hineni*"—"Here I am." We respond to God's call by serving the Other, our neighbor.

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[71] Jill Robbins, "Tracing Responsibility" in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, p.178

The infinite responsibility that I feel for the Other is not something that can be understood in concepts or reached as a conclusion in judgments. It is not something freely chosen or decided on after deliberation. Rather it is something that is already ascribed to me before being born. The face of the Other commands and underlines my responsibility; I cannot escape and avoid this call to infinite responsibility. In *Otherwise than being or beyond essence,* Lévinas says that the face is a trace of itself, given over to my responsibility, but to which I am wanting. It is as though I were responsible and guilty for the Other's mortality. The concept of responsibility is a bond with an imperative order and command.

In *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* Lévinas writes that the responsibility for my neighbor goes beyond legality and obliges beyond contract. It comes to me prior to my freedom. An objection can be raised: how can I be responsible prior to my freedom? In order to be truly responsible I must first be free; responsibility comes from my free will. In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence,* Lévinas explains that "if the ethical terms arise in our discourse , before the terms of freedom and non-freedom, it is because before the polarity of good and evil presented to choice, the subject finds himself committed to the Good in the very passivity of supporting….. This antecedence of responsibility for freedom would signify the Goodness of the Good: the necessity that the Good chooses me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice."[72] According to Lévinas, I am responsible prior to my freedom because the essence of human being is defined by ethics and not by freedom. The fact that I am responsible prior to my freedom means that the human being is committed, by its own nature, to the Good. The feeling of responsibility does not arise as a consequence of my freedom, but it belongs to our human essence. Freedom does not justify ethics and responsibility. It is not simply defined as capacity of making free choices, but by having a fundamental moral dimension. Freedom is not arbitrary, a caprice. It designates the moral responsibility that we all have for our own choices and actions.

On the other hand, if ethics was a consequence of freedom it would mean that ethics is subordinated to ontology. Hence the Other would never be able to call my freedom into question, for as a free person I first care about myself and then about others. But I am responsible for my own freedom; I am guilty for my free choices. A criminal is judged not only for his crime, for what he did as a consequence of his free choice, but also for his intention to kill someone, for premeditated murder. Even if he did not succeed in killing the person he wanted he is still judged for having the intention of killing. That is, before exercising his freedom he is responsible for ignoring and not respecting the value of any human life. When Lévinas says that the feeling of responsibility is prior to my freedom, he means that freedom is not arbitrary; it concerns not only individuals but all humankind. If responsibility were entirely a consequence of our own freedom and choices it would not have a necessary and universal feature; it would be up to each individual to practice it or not, to recognize the nakedness and the ethical call of the Other's face. It would mean that I first exist for myself and then for the Others. If so, there will be no ethical imperative for protecting the Other.

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[72] Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p.122

> Biological human fraternity considered with the sober coldness of Cain is not a sufficient reason that I be responsible for a separate being. The sober, Cain-like coldness consists in reflecting on responsibility from the standpoint of freedom or according to a contract. Yet responsibility for the other comes from what is prior to my freedom. Responsibility does not let me constitute myself into an 'I think' as substantial as a stone or, like a heart of stone, into an in-and-for-oneself. It goes to the point of substitution for the Other, up to the condition-or the noncondition-of a hostage...before the neighbor I compare rather than appear...As irreplaceable for this responsibility, I cannot slip away without avoidance, or without fault, or without complexes. I cannot slip away from the face of the Other in its nakedness without recourse.[73]

According to Lévinas the proximity of the neighbour is my responsibility for him. To approach the Other is to be the guardian of my neighbour and to be the guardian of my brother means to be his hostage. To be responsible for the Other is to put oneself in his place, to bear the burden of his existence. As Lévinas says in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence,* responsibility is putting oneself in the place of the Other and to respond to his call. Responsibility means giving spontaneity to the Other; my own actions cannot just manifest themselves, but first they must take into account the Other. Hence my own spontaneity depends on the Other's existence. Responsibility is not a cognitive act, but exposure. Everything that characterizes my selfhood, including spontaneity and freedom, are first exposed to the Other's approval.

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[73] Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* p. 71

The infinite responsibility for the Other is a way through which God manifests in our lives. The glory of God, the Infinite is glorified in the responsibility for the Other. "Here I am" signifies me in the name of God, at the service of the neighbour who looks at me. The fear of God makes me respond to the call "Where is your brother?" and thus I become infinitely responsible for my neighbour.

### 3.3. From Ethics to Justice

As we have seen in the previous discussion, the relationship with the Other is ethical and 'infinite', and not one of 'totality'. When I totalize I conceive the relationship to the Other in such a way that I ignore his alterity and I try to assimilate and reduce him to the Same, to my own being. One can object that alterity and otherness are categories of the Same for Other is other given the Same; otherness is otherness to the Same. If there is not the Same, the Other cannot be other, for it must be other for an 'I'. The Other is for me an ego that I know to be in relation to me as to an other. But it does not necessary mean that the Other's existence depends on my recognition. As I showed in the first chapter, Lévinas' notion of Other is not the Husserlian Other conceived as an alter ego, as an ego similar to me. Lévinas' Other is not a real moment of my life, an intentional modification of my ego. He appears for me as what he is. For Lévinas, the Other is not a category of the Same; if he were, his infinite alterity would be missed and reduced to the

Same. The Other is other to the Same, but in a deeper sense, as everything other than the Same. The Other overflows the idea of infinity; the idea of infinity requires the separation of the Same from the Other. That is, the Other cannot be a category of the Same. The separation of the Same from the Other is a form of non-participation by the Same in the being of the Other. When the Same is separated from the Other, the Other no longer derives his being from the way in which he refers to the Same; he derives his being from himself. This separation is a fall of the Same and the Other from totality. While the idea of totality seeks to integrate and to assimilate the Other to the Same, the idea of infinity maintains the separation between the Other and the Same. The idea of infinity is moral in that it is an idea of what the finite being lacks in relation to infinity; it underlines that the Other is not a category of the Same. The Other is not a category of the Same because he is imaged in the face. The Other is present through his face, and thus as exceeding any idea or category that I could have about him. His face escapes any reduction to the order of representation and manifests as an ethical challenge addressed to the Same. As I showed in the previous section of this chapter, the face of the Other endows the Same with a responsible freedom. In its essence, the ethical relation—and ethics is entirely the advent of the relation between the Other and the Same—is the situation in which I find myself when I am confronted by the face of the Other and I am made responsible for it.

'Ethics', 'ethical' are notions that describe a certain event of being in a relationship to the Other irreducible to comprehension and cognition. As I emphasized in the second section of the second chapter, Lévinas shares Descartes' conception of infinity and the relationship between *res cogitans* and the infinity of God. Descartes' idea concerning the relationship of the *res cogitans* to God serves Lévinas as model of a relationship between two terms that is based on height and asymmetry. The Other is present to me through his face that is the trace of an imperative 'height'. This height does not interpose a distance and separation between the I and the Other. On the contrary, it represents the enigma of a command that bursts through all empirical appearance. This imperative is " Thou shalt not commit murder!" the face is at once the visage of the Other, an empirical presence, but, on the other hand, it stands more broadly for the otherness as moral command, whether the other person is literally present or not. This moral command subsists beyond any empirical presence here and now, it is a continuous call to ethics and justice.

Ethics is first philosophy and comes first because the Other person comes first. The priority of the Other person, which legitimates any putting of the other before the self, is what constitutes ethics in the first place. The face of the Other becomes the beginning of any philosophy conceived as basic ethical discourse of the alterity. It is within the ethical domain that the interiority of the 'I' and the transcendence of the Other's face meet.

The alterity is expressed in the Other's face and thus provides the unique matter possible for total negation. The Other is the only being I can wish to kill. But, the face resists to these annihilation tendencies through its primordial expression: the command "thou shalt not commit murder." Only a face can express "Thou shalt not commit murder." Murder always comes at the face; it is violent insofar as it overlooks and forgets the face. In *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Lévinas mentions a question that was put to him during a conference. Do the criminals and the Nazi have a face? His answer is yes, they do, but they just forget and overlook the Other's face. The question is, if they do, is it our responsibility to 'remind' them by being the victim? Is it necessary to sacrifice in order to re-establish the true value of the face? The problem is that the sacrifice of "other faces" does not necessary lead to the recognition of the ethical challenge of the face. Contemporary history still contains many examples of criminals and genocides (such as in Kosovo, Darfur). Hence, the number of victims does not change anything. Our responsibility is not to remind to the persons responsible for these crimes and genocides by being a victim, by passively accepting this sacrifice. We must not be a victim, but, as Lévinas does, we must remind and teach them the true value of the face as ethical and religious challenge. In the case of criminals and Nazi, we can talk about a kind of "dehumanization" of the face, that is to ignore the metaphysical meaning that lies beyond the empirical appearance of the face. Our responsibility is to do something, show that justice must concern all humankind, that everyone is responsible for all people of the world. I can perform a totalitarian act upon the Others, but that way I deny the ethical significance of their face. In what follows I will show that the encounter with the Other is a 'face to face' relationship that will ground justice. If I perform a totalitarian act upon the Other, I deny the significance of the 'face to face' relationship and thus I deny the validity of justice.

The face affects us ethically in the immediacy of a dialogical relationship rather than as concept or object. The ethical relationship towards the Other is defined by Lévinas as a relationship 'face to face'. It is not a problem to imagine oneself caught in the gaze of the other, lost in that gaze and thus responding to it. The relation 'face to face' is a relationship "eye to eye," a relationship in which words can miss, for the eyes can speak without words. They can express the vulnerability and mortality of any human being. Generally, it is said that people who have nothing to hide we'll look at your eyes when they discuss with you. To avoid the eyes of the other person while discussing with her suggests that something is not good and that the person has something to hide. The eyes cannot lie; the relationship 'face to face' that is "eye to eye" is a dialogical relationship in which both parts express their strengths and weaknesses. Lévinas says: "The face breaks the system. The ontology of being and truth may not ignore this face-to-face structure, that is, this structure of faith...The face that looks at me affirms me. But, face-to-face, I can no longer deny the Other...The face to face is thus an impossibility of denying, a negation of negation." [74]

The relationship face to face characterizes the realm of ethics. The 'face to face' relationship is the structure of faith, an event that overcomes the powers of representation and cognition. It is faith, trust and absolute confidence in the other person. Having the structure of faith, 'face to face' is love, ethics and justice. 'Face to face' turns the encounter with the Other into a moral experience. According to Derrida, the 'face to face' eludes every category, because the face is given simultaneously as expression and as speech, as the original unity of glance and speech. 'Face to face' eludes every category... (the face is given) not only as glance, but as the original unity of glance and speech, eyes and mouth that speaks and also pronounces their hunger. Thus it is also that which hears the invisible.... The face does not incarnate, envelop or signal anything other than the self, soul, subjectivity… The other is not signalled by his face, he is this face."[75]

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[74] Lévinas, " The I and the Totality" in *Entre nous. Thinking of the Other,* p. 33

The Other *is* his face; the face is not a metaphor, nor a figure. It presents the Other in his highest part of his body, as facing me. Derrida affirms that there is a sense in which the height of the face (in relation to the rest of the body) determines the encounter with the Other in term of the height. "The height of the face (in relation to the rest of the body) perhaps determines in part the expression most high. If the height of the most-high does not belong to the space, it is not because it is foreign to space, but because it is the origin of the space orientating space through speech and glance." [76]

The welcoming of the Other's face is the origin of the space, that is, the encounter with the Other gives to the space a special meaning of an ethical encounter. The space does not designate anymore a totality and a closed circle, but the infinity, the total openness and welcoming of what exceeds any totality.

In his commentary of Lévinas 'face to face' relation, Derrida talks about a fundamental religious dimension attributed to the relationship between the I and the Other. Lévinas himself characterizes the 'face to face' relation in terms of the encounter of the human with the divine. He always links the moral dimension, the height of the Other to religion. Calling the 'face to face' relation religion, Lévinas raises intersubjectivity to religion, above its own ontological possibilities. That is, God imposes himself on humankind and commands by way of interhuman relationships.

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[75] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, p. 100

[76] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, p. 100

In *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas underlines that the Same and the Other cannot enter into a cognition that would encompass them. "The conjuncture of the Same and the Other, in which even their verbal proximity is maintained is the direct and full face welcome of the other by me. This conjuncture is irreducible to totality… Even when I shall have linked the Other to myself with the conjunction "and," The Other continues to face me, to reveal himself in his face. Religion subtends this formal totality."[77]

'Face to face' carries the attribute of a religious relationship as an irreducible relation. Lévinas defines religion in *Totality and Infinity* as the relationship that subsists between the Same and the Other despite the impossibility of the Whole-the idea of Infinity. 'Face to face' is the only relationship that can announce the Infinity. It describes a relationship with someone that I can assimilate and reduce to the Same. The idea of Infinity as transcendence itself and overflowing of an adequate idea is expressed and made present through the Other's face. 'Face to face' has the attribute of a religious relationship where religion is defined as "the relation between the being here below and the transcendent being that results in no community of concept or totality."[78] That's the reason why when I encounter the Other I see in him "the face of God," that is God's ethical call to infinite responsibility towards the Other. "The ethical relation, the face to face, also cuts across every relation one could call mystical, where events other than that of the presentation of the original being come to overwhelm or sublimate the pure sincerity of this presentation, where intoxicating equivocations come to enrich the primordial univocity of expression, where discourse becomes incantation as prayer becomes rite and liturgy, where the interlocutors find themselves playing a role in a drama that has begun outside of them." [79]

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[77] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity,* p. 81

[78] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 80

'Face to face' describes both the empirical and the metaphysical meaning of the encounter with the Other. I welcome the Other in a 'face to face' relationship and, at the same time, I am aware of the fact that this encounter is not between two equals, for the Other's face expresses the Infinite. The movement 'face to face' is a movement toward the Other, a movement of the subject subjected to the Other who commands, an upright movement, a movement to God. Ethics cannot be founded on reason, but on the aspiration to be 'face to face' with the Other and thus with God. The relationship 'face to face' emphasizes the idea that always a Thou is inserted between me and God. The constant presence of a third party is the source of any justice. The face of the Other reveals "the third."

The demanding presence of the Other's face is the presence of the third. As Lévinas underlines many times, the third regards me in the eyes of the other. The face is both the neighbour and the face of all faces. In the Other's face, the third and all other faces present themselves. The face of the Other is incomparable and identical with any other face. On the other hand, the third must not be understood as a purely empirical fact. The Other's face reveals not only the visible Other, but also the invisible Other who represents every person. The third becomes a structure that co-constitutes the proximity of the neighbour.

In *Totality and Infinity,* Lévinas affirms that the presence of the face is destitution, presence of the third party, of the whole humanity. The Other does not only put my freedom into question, but also calls me to responsibility. The epiphany of the face attests the presence of the third party, the whole humanity in the eyes that look at me. The movement from ethics and justice is a movement from the Other to all Others. In fact, justice comes already to be when I speak to the human other. What summons me to respond is the appearance of the face. The origin of ethics and justice lie in the encounter with the Other, in the 'face to face' relation, in the 'eye to eye' relation. The Other faces me and this facing position can be only as a moral summons. If in ethics I am alone and irreversibly responsible for the Other, in justice my absolute responsibility for the Other is transformed into a concern for all in society. Lévinas likes very much to cite Dostoyevsky with the affirmation made by his character, Alyosha, in *The Brothers Karamazov*. "We are all guilty for all and for all men and I more than the others." This affirmation also underlines the movement from ethics to justice, from the concern and responsibility for my neighbour to the responsibility I have for all humankind. Man is created by God and is an autonomous being. But for becoming a person who behaves ethically and justly with other people one must put oneself in the service of the others. "I am not his (the Other) equal, I am forevermore subject to him. My resistance begins when the harm he does me is done to as third party who is also my neighbour. It is the third party who is the source of justice, and thereby of justified repression; it is the violence suffered by the third party that justifies stopping the violence of the other with violence. The idea that I am responsible for the harm done by the other-an idea rejected, repressed although psychologically possible-brings us to the meaning of subjectivity."[80]

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[79] Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.202

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[80] Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* p. 84

What brings us the meaning of subjectivity is Alyosha's remark about the infinite and asymmetrical responsibility that the 'I' has towards all others, all humankind. I am guilty more than all others, that is, I cease to consider myself as a particular case of the I and nobody can substitute to me. The movement of ethics and justice is orientated by an original direction: from the Other to the self. Only in the face of the Other the self comes to feel itself as an ethical agent.

Ethics matters in my everyday contact with the Other that confronts me and claims my response. In the realm of the ethical I have an infinite responsibility to the Other that could not possibly be fulfilled. Responsibility for the Other is an imperative to the good that I recognize but cannot attain. Whatever I do I can never do enough for the Other. The question is if I am always infinitively responsible and hence always faulted how do I work for justice in the world? As I showed in the previous section about responsibility, the fact that I can never fulfil my infinite responsibility for the Other does not necessary mean that responsibility is a senseless process, that I cannot do anything. I am infinitely responsible, that is, I may never stop acting and thinking about my responsibility for the Other.

The responsibility for the Other defines itself as what cannot be avoided, as a continuous process that gives meaning to our life; it is infinite in the sense of having no boundaries in time and space. The idea of infinite responsibility does not have any boundaries for the human world; I am not only responsible for the Other, for my neighbor, but at the same time, for all neighbors, for all humankind

The infinite responsibility towards all Others, all humankind introduces the third party and, thus, the problem of justice. My infinite responsibility is not subjective and does not know any preferences or caprices. It is an objective process that obliges me to care about all world and humankind without any differences or preferences. There is no nation that is better and entitled to dominate other people because of arbitrary reasons such as color of skin, geographical position, civilization. The presence of the third party shows me that I am responsible for all humankind so that I cannot privilege anyone.

Lévinas' ethics depends on an account of the relationship between the subject and the other person that puts the weight of responsibility on the subject and the gives dominance to the Other. But in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* he writes that with the entrance of a third party, is produced the order of justice moderating or measuring the substitution of me for the other. There is also justice for me. The third party somewhat "corrects" the asymmetry of the face-to-face relation. As Lévinas says, thanks to God I am another for the others and I am approached as Other by the Others. The relationship with the third party is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at. That is, I am not a victim of the idea of infinite responsibility, because the Other, all Others are also responsible for me. They also have to respect and be responsible for me, for what happens to me. Justice re-balances the apparent disequilibrium stipulated by the ethics of infinite responsibility by arguing for the equality of all parties involved: I, the Other, the Third party. The introduction of the idea of third party and justice shows that we cannot assume only the role of victim. The Others who transform us into victims are also responsible for us. During the Holocaust, Jewish people cannot be seen as simple victims who are infinitely responsible for their torturers; their torturers are also responsible for what they did, because the Jewish people were Others for the Nazis. The truth of the Nazism and of the anti-Semitism is the impossibility of the human being of escaping oneself. From this point of view, the only accessible truth is that of a pure subjectivity. The hate towards the Jewish people reflects the ontological betrayal, this infidelity given the essence, which makes him to have a contestable, passing, and indeterminable identity. By Jews' extermination Nazis pretended to destroy the curse of alterity. The refusal of the difference and alterity has been the basis of Nazism. .Nazis sought systematically to reduce the Jews as Other into a non-Other, a species of vermin without individual identity. But by obliging Jews to wear the Star of David (often yellow-colored) on the arm, Nazis were, in fact, identifying Jews as the Other. And the fact that, after the Second World War, the Star of David became a symbol of Judaism shows that what was intended to be an object of shame and annihilation couldn't destroy but maintained and imposed the Jews as the Other, their alterity.

In *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, Lévinas points out here the problems of the transition from ethics to justice. 'The third party is other than the neighbor but also another neighbor, and is also the neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow. What then are the other and the third party for one another? Which passes before the other in my responsibility? The other stands in a relationship with the third party, for whom I cannot entirely answer, even if I alone answer, before any question, for my neighbor. The other and the third party, my neighbors, contemporaries of one another, put distance between me and the other and the third party."[81]

Justice has the role to solve up the ambiguity of the ethical order of the responsibility for the Other and for the third. Judgement, comparisons are necessary; we need laws to render justice possible. The laws of justice are supposed to be universal and objective so that anyone will be privileged. Lévinas says that justice calls "in turn for judgement and comparison, a comparison of what is in principle incomparable, for every being is unique… In the necessity of being concerned for with justice the idea of equity appears the basis of objectivity."[82] Justice establishes a form of equality and measure, a set of social rules. But, as Lévinas underlines there is the danger that ethics disappear in justice, a danger that threatens goodness and the originary responsibility for the other men. "A danger of being extinguished in the system of universal laws which these laws require and support. But also the eventual possibility for goodness to be understood in the guise of prophetic voices reverberating imperiously beneath the profundity of established laws."[83] The danger is to transform the ethical principles into a system of laws, giving the impression that they are not innate to the human being; as laws, ethical principles appear as what is imposed from outside with or without the subject's agreement. But, on the other side, as laws these ethical principles will have a universal and objective applicability so that the questions of inequality or discrimination can be avoided or punished. Thus, the ethical challenge of the face can be reminded to all those who forget the metaphysical meaning of the face and reduced it to an empirical appearance.

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[81] Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence,* p.157

If we talk about justice it is necessary to admit judges, institutions and the State "to live in a world with citizens and not only in the order face-to-face. But, on the other hand, it is starting from the relation to the face, from me before the face of the other, that we can speak of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the State."[84] It is in the face to face that I try to capture the human, the I as "for-the-other" and to develop the problem of justice. That is, 'face to face' relation, the infinite responsibility to the Other, in one word, the ethical challenge of the face is the basis of justice.

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[82] Lévinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love" in *Is it righteous to be?,* p.166

[83] Lévinas, "Being-for-the-Other" in *Is it righteous to be?,* p.116

The role of justice and political institutions is to show that the other is no longer the unique person offering himself to the compassion of my responsibility. There is also the third man, the fourth so that I cannot privilege anyone. At the same time, I am also an Other for the Other, so that the feeling of infinite responsibility characterizes all human being. My face also addresses an ethical challenge to the Other, to all Others.

As I showed throughout my thesis, the face is moral height and destitution imposing obligation on the self and disturbing its equilibrium and egocentrism. The I is an autonomous being but since he puts himself in the service of God, *à Dieu*, he must say "adieu" to his egocentric tendencies and self-oriented being, to leave his selfhood. "*Adieu*" and "*à Dieu*" express the metaphysical meaning of the face. The face as *à Dieu* is the latent birth of the metaphysical meaning of the responsibility for the Other and for all Others, the origin of justice.

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[84] Lévinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love" in *Is it righteous to be?,* p.167

# CONCLUSION

The overall aim of my thesis has been to show that the face of the Other is a permanent challenge addressed to my own existence. In order to defend this main argument I discussed and analyzed the significance of the concept of 'face' within Lévinas' philosophy. First I showed that Lévinas' concept of 'face' couldn't be reduced to an empirical presence. There is a metaphysical significance of the face that bursts through its physical features and is implicit to their empirical determination as a face. In order to argue this main point concerning the metaphysical significance of the face I explored the empirical/literal meaning of the face. I made an argument from etymology so as to show and to underline the originary significance of the word "face," its different meanings and significations in our everyday language. Then, I explored and analyzed the significance of Lévinas' way of speaking about the face as an epiphany. Lévinas' preference to talk about face as epiphany already underlines the religious meaning of the face because, according to its etymological roots, the word "epiphany" means "manifestation of a god," his way of making manifest his presence within the earthly world and word. In that sense, I argued that, as epiphany, the face cannot be reduced to its physical appearance, but is the essence of any religious/ethical discourse of the alterity.

The epiphany of the face mediates between God and the Other. The face breaks through its own plastic image; it is the expression of the Other's transcendence. Lévinas relates religion and ethics by transferring the religious language to the ethical sphere. In that regard, I discussed how Lévinas divinises the relationship with alterity, with the

Other's face. Lévinas defines the relationship with the Other's face as Infinity, the idea of Infinity being for him inherently moral. It is moral in that it is an idea of what the finite being lacks in relation to Infinity. The self can strive to transcend this relation by a welcoming of the Other. I showed that for Lévinas, to have the idea of Infinity is to have already welcomed the Other. The welcoming of the Other is the beginning of moral consciousness. In order to argue this main point about the ethical and the religious challenge of the face, I discussed and showed that Lévinas' purpose is to locate the proper meaning of God as Infinity in the ethical bond. Within Lévinasian philosophy, God is held to exist in and through His 'word', in and through His ethical commandments. All ethical responsibility for the Other bears witness to the Infinite which is God. In that sense, I showed and argued that the relation with God, with Infinity, cannot be described and understood without speaking of my concern for the Other's face. Thus, the relation to God is fundamentally a relation to another person, to his/her face. In my relation to the Other, to his/her face, I hear the word of God, the divine summons "Thou shalt not kill." Hence, the empirical face makes manifest, through its facial features, an ethical call to infinite responsibility for the Other. The metaphysical significance of the face is ethical; it is a command to responsibility, to obeying the word of God. Thus, when I meet the Other's face I cannot remain indifferent for it challenges me, my subjectivity and reminds me the divine commandments about my infinite responsibility for the Other.

In the last chapter of my thesis I discussed and analyzed the meaning of Lévinas' concept of infinite responsibility for the Other, on one hand, and the transition from ethics to justice, on the other hand. Lévinas's claim about the infinite responsibility for the Other is the point of entry for illuminating the relation between the ethical and the religious in Levians' thought. The analysis of responsibility opens onto a philosophical articulation of religious notions and underlines the religious and the ethical challenge that the face of the Other addresses me in every waking moment of my existence. The responsibility for the Other is infinite in the sense that it doesn't have any conditions, and obliges me 'absolutely'. I cannot escape it at all. Then I showed how the relationship with the face of the Other becomes a relation to all Others, to all their faces. That way, the ethical message of the face becomes a universal 'law' that makes us infinitely responsible for all humankind. The religious/ethical challenge of the face becomes the main law of the human society, of all intersubjective relationships. The role of institutions, of the state is to ensure the existence of justice, that is, to remind the ethical/ religious meaning of the face to everybody

Referring to the etymology of the word "philosophy," E. Lévinas says that philosophy is not, in fact, love of wisdom, but the wisdom of love. The wisdom of love means opening towards the Other, recognizing the ethical and religious challenge of the face. The metaphysical meaning of the face is the original unity of glance and speech, the ethical and religious language of the encounter with the Other, with Infinity.

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